

BRITISH CASUALTIES ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1914-1918  
AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE MILITARY CONDUCT  
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

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### ABSTRACT

It is often asserted that British army casualties in the Great War were carelessly incurred and that this influenced the way Britain fought in the Second World War.

Manpower was a prime resource in the mobilisation for total war but its scarcity only fully realised by end of 1917 when the army was cautioned about casualties. The government, however, had feared an early popular reaction against mounting casualties. It did not materialise: the incidence of casualties was diffused over time, and households had no mass media spreading intimate awareness of battlefield conditions. The army itself never mutinied over casualties or refused to fight. The country considered the casualties grievous but not inordinate or unnecessary.

Between the wars unemployment and 'consumerism' mattered more to people than memories of the Great War, kept ritually alive by annual Armistice Day services. Welfare benefits increased, more children went to secondary school but social and political change was tardy. Many intellectuals turned pacifist but Nazi Germany made an anti-war stance difficult. Air raids rather than memories of Great War casualties preoccupied the nation as it armed for war.

In the Second World War army casualty lists were not regularly lengthy until the beginning of 1944 and did not have an adverse impact on civilian morale. The manpower shortage became acute earlier, in 1942, and army commanders were alerted to replacement problems. Politically, Churchill desired a strong, victorious British army but lack of men induced caution about casualties, particularly in relation to the invasion of Normandy, involving frontal amphibious attack on the German army. This caution communicated itself to the citizen armies in the field, which showed little natural bent for soldiering. These circumstances governed the way the army fought in the Second World War, not memories of Great War casualties - which were more numerous because of the extent over time and scale of the fighting.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Great War, as it was commonly called before 1939, was often said by historians and others to have left a scar across the body politic of Great Britain. Arthur Marwick writes that:

... society in the Twenties and Thirties exhibited all the signs of having suffered a deep mental wound, to which the agony and the bloodshed, as well as the more generalised revulsion at the destruction of an older civilisation and its ways, contributed.[1]

He further quotes E. L. Woodward who spoke of "minds scorched by war"<sup>2</sup> but recognises that the reference was probably to the intellectuals. Writing four years later in 1972, Correlli Barnett devotes twelve pages to the effects of the Great War and concludes: "The truth was that the Great War crippled the British psychologically but in no other way."<sup>3</sup> One of the ways in which Britain was not crippled was by the casualties sustained, Barnett argues, since other nations (Germany, for example) had suffered more but had not gone into decline as a result. Nevertheless, the author concedes, Great War casualties were a potent factor in fabricating that "intense dread of war" which was, seemingly, a characteristic of Britain of the thirties. B. H. Liddell Hart, an influential writer on military affairs at the time, may be cited in support of what Michael Howard has referred to as "that visceral dread of war as such which he shared in full measure with the rest of the British intelligentsia in the 1930s" to the point of advocating that the British government eschew participation in any conflict in Europe. James Joll wrote that in the aftermath of the Great War: "The sense of loss had a profound effect on political attitudes."<sup>4</sup> More recently J. M. Bourne writes: "The Great War retains its sinister

1. A. Marwick, Britain in the Century of Total War, p.62
2. Ibid. , p.113
3. C. Barnett, Collapse of British Power, p.426
4. J. Joll, Europe since 1870, p.301

memory. At Armistice Day parades the sense of sorrow and shock is still tangible. The hurt remains."<sup>5</sup>

The Official Historian of the Second World War agreed: he refers to the "instinctive aversion from the events of 1914-18", to "an emotional repugnance to the horrors and privation of war" which, along with the memory of the "slaughter and filth of the trenches left a legacy of passionate hope, indeed belief, that such a war would never be fought again." He was writing of the early to mid-1930s, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was arguing that rearmament, implying heavier government spending, would be unpopular with an anti-militarist electorate.<sup>6</sup> Michael Howard writes that the governments of the day believed that war should be avoided at almost any cost,<sup>7</sup> although as Brian Bond indicates,<sup>8</sup> there is the suggestion that they were misreading the electorate. The Official Historian of the second volume of the Grand Strategy series presumably had similar thoughts when he wrote that Neville Chamberlain "often paid excessive attention to the probable effect of our measures on public opinion."<sup>9</sup> It is noticeable, however, that in his book on The Origins of the Second World War, A.J.P. Taylor does not mention memories of the Great War as a negative factor in the balance of considerations in the public's mind as it contemplated the likelihood of further hostilities.

'The Lost Generation' allegedly eliminated by the casualties of the Great War (particularly among the elite) was referred to freely in the years after 1918. The phrase was an expression of the sense of human tragedy rather than any precise indication of what the nation had foregone in economic

5. J. M. Bourne, Britain & the Great War, Preface

6. O.H.G.S. Vol.I pp.38/125

7. M. Howard, Continental Commitment, p.99

8. B. Bond, British Military Policy between the Two World Wars, p.215

9. O.H.G.S. Vol.II p.150

or other capability but it nevertheless formed the basis, according to some, of a long-lasting national myth. Indeed, J. Terraine spends the greater part of a book<sup>10</sup> exposing what he calls The Great Casualty Myth. Yet it is not surprising that the scale on which men had been killed and maimed should be remembered in the years following 1918 (and it matters not in this context whether other countries fared worse or better). Two important statesmen, W. S. Churchill and D. Lloyd George, who had held office in the War and were still in the public eye, had published weighty books in which condemnation of both military strategy and tactics featured strongly. The former, himself to be Prime Minister in the Second World War, had written in the early 1920s<sup>11</sup> of the mistaken policy of attrition which, whilst ensuring that British lives would be sacrificed in frontal attacks, brought neither corresponding (certainly not higher) losses to the Germans, as was claimed, nor for the first four years, appreciable victories. The latter, who had been Prime Minister for almost the last two years of the Great War, wrote some ten years later in terms almost vituperative of British generalship in France and Flanders: he devoted a chapter of eighty seven pages (the longest in a long book) to "The Campaign of the Mud: Passchendaele".<sup>12</sup>

For those who read elsewhere than in the works of politicians, there was a considerable volume of literature available, especially from the late 1920s onwards, whose central characters were intimately caught up in the war, often biographical accounts of personal experiences in which the death and mutilation of both friend and enemy is frequently and sometimes bloodily described. There was also an appreciable output of poetry, some of high quality composed during the war and published before it ended. Barnett believes these memoirs, stories and plays fashioned the

10. J. Terraine, The Smoke & the Fire, passim

11. W. S. Churchill, The World Crisis, p.49 et seq.

12. D. Lloyd George, War Memoirs, Ch.LXIII



attitudes of the middle classes in particular in the years between the wars and other military historians (e.g. B. Bond, J. Keegan) have noted the impression made by war literature current in the 1930s. At junior level, war hero stories were commonplace. The historian of the first decade after the war gives it as her opinion that although this literature was not anti-war it "... had an immense influence on the reading public [and] ... made it certain that people would never again go into a war with the illusions of 1914."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to all this, the memory of the Great War was kept alive by War Memorials in every town and most villages and the annual, mournful Service of Remembrance, observed always at eleven o'clock on every 11th of November, no matter on what day of the week the date fell. At that time of the year money was raised for ex-servicemen in need by the sale of poppies, the emblem of "Our Glorious Dead". Remembrance Day, like the Monarchy with which it was intimately associated, was a British national symbol. In sum, as D. C. Watt has expressed it, the generation in power in the 1930s when faced with the probability of another war had a feeling of "deja vu", of pessimism, which was "kept alive by twenty years of ubiquitous war memorials to the fallen, of two minutes silences on Armistice Day, poppies and Laurence Binyon or his analogues."<sup>14</sup>

A medical officer who was with his unit in the trenches in the Great War for over two years has told us (he was writing in 1945) of the impression made on the young brought up in the years between the two World Wars:

He [the Great War soldier] came out of the Army in a critical mood, with Loos or the Somme or Passchendaele graven on his mind. His sons, the soldiers of this war

13. N. Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties p.247

14. D. C. Watt, Too Serious a Business, p.86

[i.e. the Second World War] have grown up with these tales in their ears.[15]

This asseveration reveals the origin of the general aversion from war attributed to the populace during the inter-war years by citing specific battles in the Great War when heavy casualties were incurred: it was the loss of life and limb that remained focussed in the memory. The implication is that British commanders and soldiers fighting in a future war would seek to avoid a repetition of bloodshed on that scale.

Thus the Great War, and particularly its casualties, were viewed in retrospect with sadness and, often, accusingly. In some sections of the nation - e.g. the circles in which Vera Brittain moved after the war - this gave an impulse to pacifism; in others - e.g. where Liddell Hart was influential - to warnings against commitments which could lead to continental-type ground warfare; and in yet others, anti-war sentiment developed into leanings to the political left often associated with the appearance of the Left Book Club and the thesis that wars were brought on and fought for the benefit of the capitalist classes in general and the armament manufacturers in particular. In addition there was a widespread belief that in the next war aerial bombardment would result in civilian casualties on an almost 1914-18 battlefield scale. Despite all this, by the end of the 1930s the British had overcome their reluctance and fears and they took up arms against Nazi Germany willingly if without great enthusiasm. Marwick sums the situation up thus: "There were now few in Britain to doubt that, however gloomy the prospect, there was no alternative to a declaration of war on Germany."<sup>16</sup> He continues, in a comparison with 1914: "... there was a deeper sense of inescapable national purpose" when indeed the Kaiser's Germany presented a less apparent threat to Britain than Hitler. In this perception the memory of the Great War must have aided rather than obfuscated the decision to go to war in 1939:

15. C. Moran, Anatomy of Courage, Preface p.xvii

16. Marwick, op.cit., p.255

people recognised only too well the belligerent character of their former enemy.

The question, then, must be asked as to whether the shadow thrown by the Great War, with its yearly-remembered dead, did really influence the resolve of the nation to go to war again; and the way in which it proceeded to fight the war, having decided to enter it? In turn this leads to an examination of how deep the shadow was. Did the Great War, with its 700 thousand killed and well over one and a half million wounded, leave such a universal and grievous mark on those who went through it, at home and at the front, that repetition would be thought intolerable - and be self-evidently so to succeeding generations?

Part I looks at the evidence relating to the impact of casualties upon the government, evolving its strategy for the war, upon the civilian population, upon the soldiers doing the fighting and on their commanders.

Part II looks at Britain in the 1920s and 1930s for evidence that the casualties of the Great War had in practice left a lasting impression on society, which could have modified the way its citizen army fought in the Second World War; or whether other influences, unconnected with the Great War, predominated.

Part III follows a pattern similar to that of Part I, particular attention being paid to Churchill's attitude to casualties in the context of Allied strategy.

PART I

Casualties and Government policy:

The People and the Army in the Great War

## Chapter 1 - Manpower and casualties in total war

Both World Wars were fought, in Europe at least, before nuclear power and electronics transformed military technology. In those wars, and especially in the Great War, manpower in the field was the prime factor in delivering the volume of firepower needed to defeat the German army and manpower in industry the prime factor in producing the necessary armaments at home. They were both total wars - the Second World War from the outset and its predecessor from mid-1916 onwards - and thus involved the whole adult working population. In the Great War the responsibilities of government widened drastically after the opening months; and in no sector of national life was this better illustrated than in the central control of manpower, where government moved from permitting voluntary self-allocation within the military/industrial complex at the outset of the war to the assumption of full powers to direct labour by the end of it. This change was wrought by the realisation of the extent and nature of the effort required of the British Empire as a major contributor to the defeat of the Central Powers. The extent, as it related to the availability of manpower, became clear very early on from the weight of numbers behind the German attack through Belgium and France, (the Germans had some 1,500 thousand men in the field, the French 1,200 thousand and the B.E.F was initially about 160 thousand strong), and the consequent need for Britain to aid her chief ally with an army of continental size. The nature of the calls upon manpower was dictated by, inter alia, the need to equip such an army (and its auxiliary air force), which made unforeseen demands, especially in respect of artillery, as siege-war tactics developed; the requirements of food production and shipbuilding in response to German submarine attacks on sea-borne supplies; and the effort necessary to maintain industrial exports in order to pay for the war.

In terms of numbers and the procurement of basic equipment, the Army lent itself more readily to rapid expansion

than the Navy. In action the land forces would certainly suffer higher losses, in an absolute comparison, than those fighting at sea. (Accusations by the French that their ally was not pulling its weight were often met, however, by the response that, as a sea power, Britain's major effort was behind its navy.) It may be supposed that the British government had some notion of the casualties sustained by the French Army in the first months of the war, but in any case the British Army's own losses, at the battles of 1st and 2nd Ypres in particular, left no doubt that the sacrifice would be severe (to use an epithet commonly employed at the time to describe casualties). The battle of Loos confirmed this, demonstrating the likely result of committing a recently recruited and insufficiently trained army to frontal attacks in modern war. Further, if, as it was argued by the Army, it was imperative to keep units up to strength by drafting in men to replace those eliminated, permanently or temporarily, then casualties would patently impact upon Britain's military and industrial capacity to prosecute the war.

There was an additional and weighty consideration: what would be the effect of heavy (another favourite word) casualties on the nation's will to go on with the fight? A recent history of the Press in the Great War states:

Many senior politicians and officials doubted the commitment of the British people to winning the war ... For at least the first two and a half years of the war, the relationship between the authorities and the press was dominated by an excessive and probably misplaced concern about the state of public morale.[1]

The authors questioned why politicians and civil servants should have expressed such concern about the country's willingness to fight, given the evidence of the rush of volunteers to the colours, particularly in 1914-15. The reason was that early enthusiasm notwithstanding, as the nature of future military difficulties over manpower became apparent from 1915 onwards the War Office, and others,

1. J. Curran and J. Seaton, Power without Responsibility, p.75.

perceived that voluntary recruitment would be insufficient. There would have to be conscription, long since advocated by Britain's senior soldier, Field Marshall Lord Roberts. Yet many feared an adverse reaction among the populace, if such measures were introduced, and this was a factor in the minds of those who doubted on other grounds whether conscription was a realistic policy option.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the government would need to be alive to both the morale and manpower aspects of the struggle if Britain were not to be defeated in the field or at best be forced into a disadvantageous peace, a possibility which seriously concerned ministers in late 1917. Even where it was dependent on volunteers and persuasion the government was, nevertheless, held responsible for the allocation of manpower (usually referred to at that time as distribution) between the several claimants. Furthermore, even with the country at war the government was still answerable to a House of Commons whose members would support the dismissal of ministers who were not performing adequately; and behind them stood an electorate which, if somewhat truncated, was informed at least in part by a press with the power of free political comment.

Lloyd George was aware of the importance of public opinion from the beginning, as a contemporary has observed.<sup>3</sup> In a populace-rousing speech at the Queen's Hall, London on 19 September 1914, he stressed the need for sacrifice and the debt owed by all to Duty and Patriotism. He then held the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer, not usually considered a key appointment in wartime, but the 'People's Champion' did not conceive of himself as confined to matters of finance. On 1st January 1915, well before the defensive action at Ypres in April, heavy in casualties, Lloyd George was writing to his ministerial colleagues (in a memorandum surveying the position so far reached in the war), that the New Army then being raised by Kitchener constituted

2. Bourne, op.cit., p.202.

3. C. Mallet, Mr Lloyd George: A Study, p.93.

a force of a totally different character from any which has hitherto left these shores. It has been drawn almost exclusively from the better class of artisan, the upper and lower middle classes ... and the people of this country will take an intimate personal interest in its fate ... There is a real danger that the people of Great Britain ... will sooner or later get tired of long casualty lists

and whilst "good soldiers will face any dangers ... this intermittent flinging themselves against impregnable positions breaks the stoutest hearts in the end."<sup>4</sup> The politician's sensitivity to the impact of Army casualties on public opinion and the electorate is, even at this early stage, plain.

Initially the government was concerned to limit casualties because of the small size of the British Expeditionary Force compared with the number of men fielded by France and Germany: in those early days it was decided that losses on a continental army scale could not be afforded. Thus the Secretary of State for War's instructions to the Commander-in-Chief, B.E.F. dated 10th August 1914 stated:

...it will be obvious that the greatest care must be exercised towards a minimum of loss and wastage ... In minor operations you should be careful that your subordinates understand that risk of serious loss should only be taken where such risk is authoritatively considered to be commensurate with the object in view.[5]

These instructions were repeated verbatim in an otherwise only slightly modified full version on 28th December 1915 when General Sir Douglas Haig assumed command of the B.E.F.<sup>6</sup>

The other face of this preoccupation with the effect of losses on its relatively small land forces was the launch in the early months of the war of a recruiting campaign designed to stimulate voluntary enlistment on a scale sufficient to provide, eventually, an army of 70 divisions.<sup>7</sup> The response

4. CAB 24 1.

5. WO 32 55904.

6. WO 32 5592.

7. CAB 37 133 10.



was gratifyingly adequate in terms of numbers (two million men for the Army by mid-1915) but indiscriminating in that men joined the colours whose skills would have been more effectively employed in the production of war material in Britain.

Two facts about the situation had become clear by early 1915: first, as far as the Army itself was concerned, the constraint was the capacity to handle the intake and train new divisions rather than the scarcity of men at that time coming forward; and second, the armaments industry could not equip the new armies out of its present production. The availability of manpower for wartime industries does not seem to have been reckoned as presenting insuperable obstacles - at least to those surveying the scene in the first months of 1915 - although the difficulties in the way of the rationalisation of production as between private firms themselves and also between the latter and the government's own ordnance and aircraft factories were in practice to prove stubborn. That peacetime industrial production required thorough reorganisation in order to match the Army's demands in war became plain when British infantry attacks on the Western Front in the first half of 1915 failed - as the generals alleged - for lack of artillery support. By that date, also, British casualties incurred since the beginning of the war were approaching 200 thousand, exceeding the total strength of the army despatched to France almost a year before. If their replacements were to be adequately armed and their firepower increased - mainly by the provision of more artillery - wartime industrial production would necessarily become a Cabinet priority.

Accordingly Lloyd George vacated the Treasury in May 1915 to head the new Ministry of Munitions with the task of developing an armaments industry on an appropriate scale. In his new capacity Lloyd George recognised that government direction of the industrial workforce would be necessary to carry through the expansion required but was unable to

convince his colleagues that legislation providing for power of compulsion would be needed.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, during this first full calendar year of the conflict the country was groping its way towards organising its national effort for total war. Eventually manpower distribution came to be seen as central to the plans the administration was attempting to formulate; and such plans naturally involved decisions regarding the size of the Army. There were those, certainly among the soldiers, who strongly advocated the adoption of conscription and 1915 saw, in effect, the reluctant progress down that path by a hesitant Liberal and then Liberal-dominated coalition government.

The first step was the drawing-up of a National Register of men of ages from 19 years to 41 years (the National Registration Act, July 1915) in order to provide a factual basis for manpower distribution; this was followed, later in the year, by a last attempt to provide what were foreseen as the Army's needs by appeals for the voluntary enlistment of men between 18 and 41 (the Derby scheme). This appeal suited the political purpose of the Prime Minister. As a Liberal he was opposed to conscription because he feared his Party would not follow him. His Coalition government, however, contained pro-conscription Conservatives and they, and the casualties in France, combined to nudge Asquith in the direction of compulsory service. If he could demonstrate that after a vigorous call to the nation, voluntary enlistment proved inadequate, he would have a stronger argument for introducing conscription.

Inadequate it turned out to be, but not because men were unwilling to join up: the one million young unmarried men who did not come forward thought it unfair that they should be treated less advantageously than married men of the same age,

8. R.J.Q. Adams & P. P. Poirier, The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain 1900-18, p.91.

who would only be drafted later.<sup>9</sup> At the same time casualties in the field were beginning to persuade the doubters that the nation must needs resort to conscription. The losses at Loos in late September/early October amounted to some 60 thousand, if subsidiary attacks are included, and was the first occasion on which divisions of the New Army were engaged on any scale. They were sufficient, according to one historian,<sup>10</sup> to induce the Secretary of State for War, Field Marshall Lord Kitchener (who had opposed conscription, following his Prime Minister's political lead, as well as his own military instincts) to come round to the view that voluntary enlistment would not serve to keep the army up to strength. At about the same time (6 September 1915) a Cabinet Committee assessing the nation's resources under the headings of Men, Money and Munitions, treated wastage (i.e. men killed, wounded, missing or sick) as simply a number and assigned no political or moral dimension to the casualties which, it estimated, the citizen army would suffer.<sup>11</sup> In a Supplementary Memorandum, the Committee concluded that the nation's resources were sufficient for an army of seventy divisions provided conscription were introduced.

In November 1915 the British and French High Commands met in France to draw up their plans for offensive actions during the following year. For the British the consequence was an undertaking to provide an army of sixty two divisions by June 1916. When, following this meeting, military policy for 1916 was discussed in the War Committee of the Cabinet on 28 December 1915, Mr Balfour asked for a "genuine estimate" of British and German casualties in the proposed operations.<sup>12</sup> There is no evidence of a figure being produced for the latter but the War Office maintained that with the introduction of conscription a British army of sixty two divisions could be kept up to strength assuming a wastage rate of 123 thousand

9. Ibid., p.128.

10. G. H. Cassar, Kitchener, p.499.

11. CAB 24 1 27.

12. CAB 42 6 14.

men per month.<sup>13</sup> The Cabinet assented to this figure in February 1916 (although Grieves states, but gives no reference, that it was later reduced to 75 thousand, which was certainly nearer to that eventually experienced).<sup>14</sup> The government had thus made up its mind on conscription and in 1916 passed two Military Service Acts empowering it to conscript first unmarried, then married men in the 18 to 41 age group.

General Joffre, commanding the French armies (with which the British were instructed to cooperate) pushed back the date of the Allied offensive to be launched in 1916, with the consequence that Allied plans were upset by the German initiative in attacking at Verdun in late February. During the battles of the Somme Prime Minister Asquith stated that the reason for the British attacks was to relieve pressure on the French and, indeed, Haig brought forward the date of the operation at Joffre's request. Considering the extent of French casualties incurred during the defence of their lines and the following counter-attacks, it is a comment on Allied co-operation that British action was not forthcoming earlier, despite Haig's doubts about the readiness of his divisions. There is, however, no direct evidence that the British government or Army were influenced in their thinking by the French losses at Verdun; or indeed by French casualties during the preceding eighteen months of fighting when, it was later estimated but was probably not known at the time with any accuracy, they had almost reached the figure of two million men (more than four times the British total). In the many memoranda prepared by General Robertson for the Cabinet in the first months of 1916 the cost to the British in terms of casualties is given no prominence at all. For example, in a paper dealing with tactics in France, written on 1st January 1916, expected British losses have no mention.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis is upon

13. CAB 24 2 92.

14. K. Grieves, The Politics of Manpower 1914-18, p.34.

15. CAB 24 2 57.

obtaining sufficient men to replace casualties, which are not quantified in the paper. Then again, on 21 March in a Cabinet paper on manpower he writes, "We cannot expect to secure a favourable peace without hard fighting and that means heavy losses which we must be prepared to suffer and replace."<sup>16</sup> But no figure is put on the losses. The General Staff nevertheless argued that Allied attacks on the scale planned would exhaust the German army, which they believed was already overstretched and would run out of reserves. (Kitchener estimated that by 1917 attrition of the German army would force her government to negotiate for peace.<sup>17</sup>) The British should, therefore, raise the maximum number of men for the Army and concentrate them on the Western Front.

By July 1916, the month of the Somme offensive, the war was nearly two years old. Conscription for males had been introduced. Yet despite clear evidence from the field as to what the casualty rate was likely to be, there persisted a lack of urgency in assessing the implications for overall manpower availability. The discussions which did take place revolved around the numbers demanded by the army, with the losses ('wastage') a simple numerical deduction.

16. CAB 42 9 8.

17. CAB 24 1 9.

## Chapter 2 - Lloyd George and the Somme

Although it was doubtful if the Army could manage to place sixty two divisions in France by mid-1916 (in fact the number reached sixty) and whether those divisions would be well-enough trained, (General Haig, who had assumed command of the B.E.F. from Field Marshal Sir John French at the end of December 1915, thought they would not), there was all the same an air of optimism at GHQ France in respect of the outlook for 1916. The Army was not, however, satisfied it was being allocated sufficient men, perhaps because, as Grieves suggests, the estimate of expected wastage had been set too high and so could not in all months be covered by the intake of new recruits.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty lay in finding a base for measurement. Experience was thought to be an unsatisfactory guide because conditions varied over the months and according to sector, the enemy's activities were obviously unpredictable, and the policy of GHQ itself might change. This in fact occurred when Haig assumed command: he believed in constant raiding and these local and small-scale operations - and the Germans' reaction to them - cost, between 10 December 1915 and 30 May 1916, 125,241 all ranks.<sup>2</sup> No major operations were undertaken at this time but these casualties, coming on top of the 'normal' wastage figure, pushed up the total count.

The Somme offensive was not, however, held up because of shortage of men. The situation regarding guns and shells was also deemed acceptable, artillery being the arm chosen to blast through the German defences. The British Commander-in-Chief, therefore, found himself able to respond positively to the French plea to attack on 1st July 1916 in order to relieve the pressure at Verdun, although he was not at all happy about the timing, the place and the amount of French support he would receive. Thus the Somme offensive was launched and, with the government apparently not dissenting even after the

1. Grieves, op.cit., p.28.

2. J. Terraine, Douglas Haig, p.193.

casualties sustained through to October, continued with high hopes of success.<sup>3</sup> On 15 August, forty five days after the attack had started, the new Secretary of State for War (Lloyd George) told the House of Commons, after a visit to France, that the Army was

full of spirit and confidence and eagerness. I have never seen men so cheerful. They are full of confidence and determination and hope - sense that victory is certain ... a soldier takes two or three years training [but] ours have only had six months training [so that he was] amazed by their skill and valour [and he was] heartily glad that my Rt. Hon. Friend [the Minister of Munitions, a post filled by Lloyd George himself up to three months previously] has supplied them with such a magnificent equipment of guns and munitions which will enable them to beat their way through without undue loss.[4]

Just over a month later, on 28 September, Lloyd George gave his "Knock-out Blow" interview to the correspondent of an American newspaper. Given the optimistic reports which had emanated from GHQ on the progress of the battle, A.J.P.Taylor is surely correct in stating that Lloyd George had indeed reposed his faith in Haig and Robertson's<sup>5</sup> strategy in France: he was expecting the British Fourth and Reserve Armies, with their cavalry divisions poised for the charge on the southern sector of the front, to break through and deliver the knock-out blow.<sup>6</sup> The facts were, however, that there was no breakthrough, territorial gains were small, German losses were unverified and Empire casualties were huge; and Lloyd George was the Secretary of State for War.

Information regarding casualties on the Somme came through GHQ and the War Office to Cabinet and public late and piecemeal. The War Committee of the Cabinet appears not to have received regular situation reports from the War Office, and those which did come before it do not highlight British

3. CAB 42 21 3, and CAB 37 155 17.

4. 85 H.C. Deb 5s.

5. General Sir William Robertson, C.I.G.S.

6. A.J.P. Taylor, Politics in Wartime, p.29.

casualties. This is understandable given the frequently torn communications between Corps and even Divisional HQs and the units in action; and more importantly, conditions along the seventeen mile battlefront itself. Nevertheless, on 19 July the Prime Minister (Asquith) reported to the King that casualties to date totalled 115 thousand, including 20 thousand missing.<sup>7</sup> The figure for the whole of July was eventually reckoned to be 164,709, so in proportion Asquith's report was not very inaccurate. On 1st August Haig reported to London that casualties in July were about 120,000 -

more than they would have been had we not attacked [and] ... cannot be regarded as unduly heavy or as sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive.

It is not possible to gauge the accuracy of this rounded figure without knowing what was considered normal wastage for this sector of the front, but it appears to be low rather than high. The C-in-C gave his estimate of German losses (130 thousand so far) and stated that if the Somme offensive were to continue for a further six weeks, Germany would be unable to replace its losses.<sup>8</sup> Robertson followed this up on 3rd October with a memorandum to the War Committee on the subject of German casualties. He compared the figure for those British losses specifically attributable to the Somme fighting with estimates of German casualties, and concluded that there is a "highly satisfactory" balance in favour of the British.<sup>9</sup>

Six days later Haig wrote to the War Committee a memorandum which had Robertson's support: "there were fair grounds for hope that very far-reaching success, affording full compensation for all that had been done to attain it, might be gained" if the offensive were maintained; if it were not, "much of the advantage already gained would be lost."<sup>10</sup>

7. CAB 37 152 1.

8. CAB 37 153 1.

9. CAB 37 157 4.

10. CAB 42 21 3.



On 26 October the War Committee noted that British casualties in a recent attack had been small but they also noted a few days later that the Germans reported that British attacks had been repulsed with heavy losses. <sup>11</sup>

The Somme offensive was closed down on 18 November because, as Haig reported, of bad weather and below-strength divisions; he believed that the German army had sustained casualties greater in number than the British and French, but gave no figures. He wrote that there was "convincing evidence" of a deterioration in German morale and the fact that territorial gains were small he said was of little importance.<sup>12</sup> British losses for the whole Somme campaign were later estimated as 415 thousand. French losses are given usually as about 200 thousand and German marginally less than the combined total of 615 thousand, though the authorities claim no great accuracy for these figures. Post Second World War military historians (e.g. Terraine, Geyer, Farrar-Hockley) have claimed the Somme as a set-back for the Germans because of the the number and quality of the losses which their mistaken tactics caused and on account of their implied admission (by later withdrawal) that they had wrongly committed their army to the defence of ground which it was neither strategically nor tactically essential for them to occupy.

In that same month of November 1916 Colonel Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the War Committee, reviewed the wastage rate as experienced by the Army during 1916 in comparison with the rate projected at the beginning of the year and concluded that casualties on the Western Front had not exceeded the projection.<sup>13</sup> It is not known whether he was in possession of the total casualties incurred on the Somme, since those battles were only just drawing to a close at the time of his

11. CAB 37 158 13; CAB 37 160 15.

12. CAB 37 160 15.

13. CAB 24 2 92.

review, but even if he were, at a wastage rate of 75 thousand per month, casualties for the year as later established at 644,346 were well within the yearly range of 900 thousand. The decision to end the offensive was made at GHQ France and not imposed upon the C-in-C by a War Cabinet worried about conserving manpower or about the impact of casualties on the home front. After the Battle of Loos an officer from one of the New Army divisions which bore severe casualties is reported to have remarked that the fighting had not been as they expected but that next time they would get it right; and this seems to have been the attitude of the Army after the Somme. However, as Haig wrote in the report just quoted,<sup>14</sup> they would need more men in France.

14. CAB 37 160 15.

### Chapter 3 - Manpower shortages in 1917

GHQ's confidence in the relation of costs to benefits implied in its strategy was not shared by all. In that same month of November when Haig terminated the Somme offensive the British and French General Staffs met at Chantilly, as they had done the year before, this time to concert their plans for 1917. On this occasion Lloyd George, as Secretary of State for War, was actively involved. It was his view, indeed, that the political leaders of the Allied Powers should confer as to the appropriate overall strategy for 1917, which should take the form of bringing concentric military force to bear on the Central Powers; they should then direct their military commanders and general staffs to work out how in practice this should be done, in co-ordination with each other. Instead, what the political leaders at Chantilly were faced with was a repeat of 1915. The generals met, decided upon their strategy - which, under Joffre's guidance, was to resemble on the Western Front the offensive campaigns of the preceding years - and then informed the civilian ministers what was to be done. The Prime Minister, Asquith, accepted this and in the opinion of E. L. Woodward this concordant attitude helped decide Lloyd George that he must take over the running of the war from Asquith.<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of State was convinced that to pursue the strategy upon which the military commanders were intent would lead to the Allies losing the war.

The factors underlying this conviction, it may be supposed, were the Somme casualties, the general manpower situation and the political - not constitutional - question of which single authority had the power and responsibility of conducting the nation's total war effort, including military strategy. When Lloyd George went to the War Office he inherited from Kitchener a secretaryship of diminished authority: his functions, as his predecessor had expressed

1. E. L. Woodward, Great Britain and the War of 1914-18, p.247.

it, were "curtailed to the feeding and clothing of the Army."<sup>2</sup> There were particular reasons, related to Kitchener's conduct of his office, why the Secretary had made over to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff his power, as President of the Army Council, of initiating military strategy. The spectacle of a general officer, Robertson, stipulating prior conditions on which he would accept a posting, conditions which materially reduced his political chief's authority, caused no alarm because Kitchener's Cabinet colleagues wished to see the authority of that particular man thus circumscribed.

Yet on Kitchener's death and the assumption of the Secretaryship by Lloyd George, the right to initiate military strategy was not restored to the Office from which it had been stripped. Thus Lloyd George, who carried political weight of the first order and had held the second most important ministerial office in the land, was obliged to listen at Cabinet meetings to an officer from his own Department expatiate on crucial military matters on which, initially at least, he had been given no briefing beforehand. The Prime Minister, who greatly admired General Robertson but whose differences with Lloyd George on how to run the war were becoming marked, was doubtless comfortable with such an arrangement; but Lloyd George's notions as to where the balance between civil and military responsibility in wartime should lie, envisaged a different scheme of things, as he was later to reveal. When Lloyd George himself came to hold the office of Prime Minister, it was of no importance where formal authority in the Army Council resided: the C.I.G.S. was unquestionably subordinate to the Prime Minister, who now took a personal interest in military strategy. And Lord Derby was not a strong man.

Control of manpower was one of the issues towards which the Prime Minister and Lloyd George took differing attitudes, right from the beginning of the war. The latter had held office first at the Ministry of Munitions and then at the War

2. Cassar, op.cit., p.435.

Office, an experience which gave him an intimate and decided view of the measures necessary to allocate labour to best advantage. He had therefore become one of those active in pressing for the setting up of formal departmental machinery to enable the government to deal with manpower distribution. As a result of this group's energies, a Manpower Distribution Board was formed in August 1916 headed by a Cabinet Minister (Austen Chamberlain) in recognition of its importance; but in the formulation of plans for labour it was given no authority over existing Departments which continued to make and push through their own claims on the manpower resources of the nation. As a consequence, the Board's attempts to bring reason and order into this sector of the total war effort were frustrated.

The next essay in manpower allocation was the institution (this time in a government presided over by Lloyd George himself) of a Department of National Service - an organ of government not directly answerable to the House of Commons whose Director (Neville Chamberlain) did not hold ministerial rank. The objective of manpower planning, to which all else should be subordinate was, in the view of the War Office, the maintenance throughout 1917 of an Army in France of 1,500 thousand men, for which 940 thousand new recruits would be needed, 450 thousand in the first three months. This would enable Britain to play its part in the plans evolved by the two General Staffs at Chantilly in November 1916. The fact that Joffre had by then been replaced by General Nivelle made no difference in this respect, because the latter also planned an offensive campaign, for which he had obtained the permission of the British and French governments.

The Department of National Service was, however, thwarted in its endeavours to place men in industry where it wished, thereby releasing fit men for military service. It had to resort to voluntary persuasion only, since, like its predecessor, it possessed no powers to dictate policy to the established Departments, which thus remained strong enough to carry through their own individual manpower programmes.

Equally important was the continuing objection of the TUC to industrial conscription: "...while workers would accept the authority of the State to direct a man to put his life at risk in the trenches, they would not accept similar authority over a man working for a private employer."<sup>3</sup> That is, union rights could be set aside if the State were the beneficiary but not for the purpose of increasing private profits.

These basic circumstances and several other complicating factors contributed to the failure of Neville Chamberlain to carry out, in the first difficult months of 1917, the task set for him by, mainly, Lloyd George himself. Among them was the absence of a set of clear objectives in a changing scene: the fast-growing need for labour in agriculture and shipbuilding, as a result of German submarine attacks on Britain's merchant shipping and overseas food supplies; the emerging resistance of the Prime Minister to handing over to the Army whatever it claimed in terms of men, without audit of the use made of them; and the entry into the war of the U.S.A., with the prospect of an army of millions to be shipped to France, however far-off in the future. Grieves states:

The uncertain military objectives of the third battle of Ypres and the more forthright criticism of the level of casualties suffered in pursuit of the "wearing down" strategy, and explained through the vocabulary of attrition, reduced the public's level of commitment to the war effort.[4]

However, as will be discussed later, although war-weariness did accumulate in 1917, there is no evidence of a lack of willingness to fight being specifically induced by public examination and rejection of the Army's plans for operations in Flanders or by any strategy of attrition: the first were not the subject of open debate in the first half of 1917 nor the second ever publicly defined or admitted.

Neville Chamberlain resigned in August 1917. His former Department became the Ministry of National Service with a

3. Adams & Poirier, op.cit., p.203.

4. Grieves, op.cit., p.176.

fully-fledged minister at its head - Sir Auckland Geddes, formerly in charge of recruitment at the War Office. The fast-developing difficulties with manpower concentrated the Cabinet's collective mind on the policy and means of labour allocation, in which debates Geddes had a strong voice as he struggled with some success to disentangle the rivalries of competing departments. (One of the most trying exercises was to obtain release from the Army of industrially skilled men who had volunteered for military service in previous years.) Geddes' Ministry became "the War Cabinet's General Staff on Manpower",<sup>5</sup> attempting to draw into one focus decisions on the distribution of manpower which hitherto had been made in accordance with often conflicting policies evolved in various different government Departments. At the same time questions were asked as to the use made of men recruited for military service, particularly in respect of the Army in France. This was particularly the case after the failure of the Nivelle offensive and the subsequent mutinies in the French armies in April/May, when it was realised that the B.E.F. would have to absorb more of the fighting.

In the early months of 1917 it is noticeable, from the questions asked in the War Committee of the Cabinet, that civilian ministers were enquiring more closely as to casualties; this contrasted with the marked lack of probing only a few months previously, during the Somme offensive, when such reports as were received barely mentioned British losses. Thus, on 19 February 1917 the War Office was required to produce a daily statement of casualties, thereby at least suggesting there had been no previous regular checking of planned wastage against losses actually incurred.

The War Office, nevertheless, continued to clamour for more men and Haig to resist being called to account for his employment of his soldiers in general and his cavalry in

5. Ibid., p.176.

particular.<sup>6</sup> Despite its complaints, the Army was able to reinforce its ranks in the first half of 1917 both from Britain (not Ireland) and the Empire (by the time of 3rd Ypres there were four Canadian and six Australian and New Zealand divisions in France). GHQ was not, then, deterred from pressing its plans for a major offensive by any alleged lack of numbers. During those months, roughly coinciding with the Department of National Service experiment, civilians in government were not as determined to restrict recruitment for military service as they later became: casualties on the Somme had made some ministers uncomfortable about the fighting in France and doubtful about the benefits of GHQ's methods of conducting it but not to the extent of vetoing Haig's proposals for his Flanders offensive.

All the same, ministerial misgivings did not go unnoticed by the General Staff at the War Office. Robertson wrote to Haig on 1st December 1916 about plans for the following year and added:

The public at home are just beginning to feel the strain of the war and, having formed unjustifiable hopes of the result of the Somme offensive, are now undoubtedly suffering to some extent from depression. In a war of this nature it is impossible to disregard the influence of public opinion upon the political and military situation ...[7]

Then again, in the discussions between the War Office and GHQ leading up to the presentation of the plans for the proposed Flanders campaign, the C.I.G.S. wrote on 14 May to the C-in-C: "The Cabinet could never agree to our incurring heavy losses with comparatively small gains which would obviously result unless the French cooperate whole-heartedly."<sup>8</sup> Robertson, at the centre of affairs in London, at least saw the difficulties the government was experiencing with manpower (though he was quite unsympathetic) and he had his own reservations about the casualties which he feared Haig may be

6. CAB 42 25 7.

7. WO 158 22.

8. WO 158 23.



about to incur in Flanders. However, a visit to GHQ after General Sir Herbert Plumer's victory at Messines (7th June 1917) persuaded him that satisfactory results could be expected.

Even so, when Haig was personally putting the case for the Flanders offensive to the War Committee later in June, he took care to stress his concern to avoid a high casualty rate. He explained that his model would not be the Arras attack of the previous April, where he had persisted in his attempts to push forward in order to support Nivelle (a Cabinet instruction) but had not succeeded, despite casualties of 158,660. Rather, he said, his example would be Messines, a limited objective victory where losses had been just over 16 thousand (though with a high proportion of killed at 3,300).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, on 18 June Haig had written: "whatever force may be placed at my disposal, my undertaking will be limited to what it is reasonably possible to succeed in." And further on: "My efforts will be restricted to gaining such victories as are within reach."<sup>10</sup> There was, then, something in the nature of an understanding - it cannot be called more - that if losses were greater than planned, with gains falling short of the expected, then the operation would be reviewed.<sup>11</sup>

Churchill, writing at the time to Lloyd George (on his own initiative, since he was not a member of the War Committee), counselled the latter to watch the casualty rate closely; however, casualties should only be a secondary consideration when deciding whether or not to sanction continuance of the battle.<sup>12</sup> Casualties per se were not made a sticking point in the arguments against the offensive. Hankey records that the decision to approve Haig's plan was finally confirmed at a dinner given by the Prime Minister for the War

9. CAB 24 4 179.

10. WO 158 24.

11. CAB 23 13 191.

12. Churchill, op.cit., p.1209.

Committee (at which Lloyd George was the only elected member of Parliament present, since Bonar Law was absent).<sup>13</sup> Bonar Law had little faith that the offensive would succeed and Lloyd George was opposed; but however grudgingly and reluctantly, it was finally authorised.

The tally of the apparently barren losses on the Somme changed the mood of the war and surely led to the growing conviction in governing circles that Mr Asquith was not the man to lead the country to victory. They certainly increased Lloyd George's frustration with the generals and determined him to bring order into the planning of manpower allocation. In the event the former waxed rather than diminished, whilst it took him nearly a whole year to make a beginning on the latter.

13. M. Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol.II, p.683.

Chapter 4 - The Government and casualties in 1918

Even though the majority of the members of the War Committee were not members of the House of Commons there is no evidence that it was collectively unmindful of the sentiment, in respect of the war, in the country at large. Certainly they were well briefed. The War Cabinet had, on 21 July, heard Sir Auckland Geddes, reporting on the unwillingness of industrial workers to enlist for military service, ascribe part of the blame to the casualties sustained by the Army and to the presence of the recuperating wounded on the streets. Sir Edward Carson, who joined the War Cabinet in July and reported the following month on public morale, mentioned casualties as a depressant. Even before the start of the Flanders offensive on 31 July, casualties in France had indeed been appreciable - approaching 500 thousand since the turn of the year. The daily lists published in The Times for the year 1917 had started in the first half of January with around 1,500 to 2,500 names, had then dipped, up to the end of February, to below 500, had risen in March/April to the early January range but then in May and early June had climbed to the 4-5 thousand bracket, being on some days over 6 thousand. (Only daily lists were published since, after a policy decision in early 1916, the Cabinet would not permit accumulated total figures to be given out in public, not even for use in British propaganda in the U.S.A. where some had proposed that they might help enlist sympathy for the Allied cause.)<sup>1</sup>

The historian of government propaganda in the Great War has written that "after 1916 industrial unrest aggravated by war-weariness led to a situation where the call for an early negotiated peace began to have a considerable impact upon the civilian population".<sup>2</sup> This found expression in Lord Lansdowne's letter to the Daily Telegraph on 29 November 1917,

1. CAB 23 6 437.

2. K. Haste, Keep the Home Fires Burning, p.141.

urging the government to examine the possibility of terms. Yet the unhappiness of organised labour was not primarily caused by the prospect of men being drafted to fight in an army suffering heavy casualties. G. Barnes, a Labour M.P. holding the office of Minister of Pensions, who had joined the War Cabinet in August 1917, reported that dissatisfaction in the mines and factories was at a very high level due to poor conditions of work brought about in part by wartime pressure for production increases.

Nevertheless, it was also generally recognised that discontent was exacerbated by what were regarded as the unfairnesses of the system of recruitment for military service. Industrial conscription was anathema to the Labour party and to many Liberals; in addition the workers themselves were upset by Army methods of recruiting under the Military Service Acts. There was criticism, in particular, of the the Army medical boards, which seemed more intent on finding men for the draft than applying standards of physical fitness. When Geddes took over his new Ministry he carried through a fundamental reorganisation of procedures and removed recruiting as a function from the War Office, taking it under his own responsibility. To the extent that unrest continued - which it did, witness the Sheffield steel workers strike, noted in Cabinet discussion on 17 November 1917<sup>3</sup> - it was often caused by the drafting of men who had believed themselves exempt from military service because of their particular industrial skill. In January 1918 Lloyd George himself had to speak to the coal miners' leaders to urge them not to oppose the government's move to call up more men from the mines.

If the workers' complaints about being drafted were specific to industrial conditions and the government's handling of manpower distribution rather than a comment on the casualty figures, neither were casualties a preoccupation with members of the House of Commons - up to November 1917 at least

- nor with the electorates where bye-elections were held. The debates on the two Military Service Bills in 1916 (held before the Somme offensive) and on Manpower Distribution, leading up to the formation of the Ministry of National Service in October 1917, did not have casualties as a central feature: members were not yet wanting to link losses with arrangements being made to draft more men for the Army. It was similarly so in the bye-elections at which independent candidates stood. At the start of the war the two major political parties had agreed on an electoral truce - that is, neither would put up a candidate in a bye-election for a seat previously held by the opposing party. After January 1916, in some constituencies where a seat became vacant, independent candidates were nominated. The Times reported eighteen such bye-elections between January 1916 and July 1918, and in none of them did the independent candidate seek votes by promising to speak out in the House or in the country against the rate of casualties in the Army. In 1917 in the bye-elections at Stockton-on-Tees (March) and South Aberdeen (April) the independents described themselves as "Peace" candidates, but they did not make an issue of casualties. They were, of course, appealing to thin electorates: women were not enfranchised, whilst for male voters there existed a residential qualification which in practice disenfranchised those serving in the armed forces.

The casualties at the Battles of 3rd Ypres, with the infantry attacks beginning on 31 July and concluding on 8th November at Passchendaele (without reaching the distant objectives Haig undoubtedly had in mind), the reverse at Cambrai in early December and the severe manpower shortage in the shipyards and certain armament industries brought about a change in the attitude of general toleration regarding the strategy to which Haig was committing his armies and the casualties they were suffering. The position of the Allied Powers was such that an increasing strain was likely to be placed on the capacity of the British Empire to fight on: Russia was out of the war; the French armies, if somewhat recovered as to morale, were very short of men; Italy was a

half-broken reed after Caporetto; and the Americans were not yet present in strength (they had some 160,000 men in France by end-1917) and were in any case untrained. As General Sir Henry Wilson wrote in his diary on 5th November, recording a talk with General Robertson:

I asked him if, looking back over two years, he was satisfied with the conduct of the war and ... he replied in the affirmative. Since he has been C.I.G.S. we have lost Rumania, Russia and Italy and have gained Bullecourt, Messines and Passchendaele.[4]

Others did not agree with Robertson, as Wilson noted on 19 November: "Really we must change in 1918 our puerile, useless, costly strategy of 1916 and 1917."<sup>5</sup>

In respect of manpower, the change took the form of the appointment by the Prime Minister (Lloyd George) of a Cabinet Committee on Manpower. It held only six meetings but between the two bodies, the Committee and the Ministry of National Service they

implemented a policy of downgrading the military priority for men in the light of high British casualty levels on the Western Front in 1917. As a result, drastically reduced expectations of manpower supply were imposed on Haig and the General Staff in France in relation to merchant ship, aeroplane and tank construction.[6]

As we have seen, the War Committee authorised Haig to go ahead with his plans for the Flanders offensive although it noted that in Britain the intake of recruits in 1917 would not offset the planned wastage, in part because of the requirements of agriculture and industry, in part because casualties had sometimes pushed up the wastage figure. After 3rd Ypres, however, the War Office's proposed wastage rate for 1918 of 583,200 was not accepted, nor the demand for a total of 1,304 thousand men for that year. As Wilson noted in his diary on 16 October, Haig (with his offensive strategies) had lost 900

4. C. E. Callwell, Diaries of Field-Marshal Sir H. Wilson, Vol.II, p.22.
5. Ibid., p.48.
6. Grieves, op.cit., p.176.

thousand men, killed, wounded and missing, from 1st July 1916 to 10 October 1917. It was, therefore, not unreasonable for the War Committee to conclude, as it did in January 1918 in response to a paper from the Supreme War Council (the newly-constituted overall Allied Command, sitting in Versailles) that if a defensive rather than an offensive stance were adopted, the German Army, even when reinforced from the East, could be held but at lesser cost in men to the Allies.<sup>7</sup> Such thinking contradicted the argument always strongly made by GHQ France - and especially by Brigadier-General John Charteris, Haig's Chief Intelligence officer - that in practice in trench warfare the defender's losses were greater than those of the attacker: hence the emphasis always given in reports from France to German casualties. In practice GHQ's argument could hardly be sustained with figures because neither side could know with any certainty what losses the other had suffered, particularly with respect to the wounded. The recovery rate of the wounded was an important element in casualty calculations

Signs of the more questioning disposition of politicians towards casualties incurred by the BEF's strategies emerged in the debates on the war situation and on manpower held in the House of Commons at the end of 1917 and beginning of 1918. The government wished to introduce legislation which it believed would enable it to cope with the manpower shortages, particularly in industry. The government's case was that there now existed an acute labour shortage and that sufficient men could be raised for the Army only by raising the age limit to 45, extending conscription to Ireland and issuing Orders which would have the effect of rendering men liable to military service who were previously considered exempt. Members used the occasion to make public their views on the way the war was going in France. On 19 November 1917, during the debate on the setting up of the Supreme War Council, there had already been criticism of the way the Army in France was

conducting the fighting, when a member reminded the House that with more soldiers being sent on leave "the knowledge of reality is spreading among the people of this country."<sup>8</sup> On 3rd December a Motion was put down enjoining the government to "exercise the greatest care that the expenditure of our manpower in the field be not out of proportion to the results obtained"; and two days later ministers were asked to give weekly casualty figures.<sup>9</sup> The Motion evoked no response and the question a negative reply. On the Motion for Adjournment on 20 December a member spoke of the casualties in France, explaining that although there had been a secret session covering the progress of the war he was impelled to speak out since he believed Parliament was responsible for the lives of soldiers in the field. He feared the Army's morale would deteriorate if, despite its gallant efforts, no victories were forthcoming.<sup>10</sup>

On what was in effect the next business day in the House (14 January 1918) the Minister of National Service (Sir A. Geddes) initiated a debate on Manpower Distribution when introducing his new Military Service Bill (which became the Military Service (No. 1) Act). He stated that "The manpower problem is the central problem of the war" and gave it as the Government's view that with Russia's exit from the war it was necessary to husband resources until America was ready to take the field in force. It followed that it was essential for the government "to see that no casualties which can rightly be avoided are incurred." Thereafter followed the much-quoted passage:

The government has gone most carefully into this question of casualties. While seeking not to hamper the action of our Commanders in the field by judging their actions by the casualty returns alone, it is determined that carelessness with regard to human life and thoughtlessness with regard to casualties shall be stamped out wherever it appears ... We are accusing no admiral or general of

8. 99 H.C. Deb 5s.

9. 100 H.C. Deb 5s.

10. Ibid.



recklessness or disregard for human life. The government is laying down a perfectly plain, general principle ... which ought at all times and more especially at this time, while we await the coming of America, to guide the government in its supervision over the actions of the Commanders it has appointed.[11]

It would be in keeping with the Prime Minister's feelings at this juncture to surmise that these remarks were directed at GHQ France as well as to the House and to the country at large. However, whilst one member inferred from the minister's statement that "in the past there had been both thoughtlessness and carelessness" and another criticised the Army for throwing untrained men into battle, there was no insistent argument that casualties were at the root of the manpower problem, nor that they were causing a general malaise in the country. As on previous occasions when manpower was debated, members did not question whether men were needed for military service but dwelt rather on the procedures for allocation and reallocation as they affected labour at home. Organised labour was, at the time, a minority of the total labour force but as A.J.P.Taylor points out, it can have been no accident that Lloyd George chose a Trade Union audience for the first clear and definitive statement of war aims made since he had become Prime Minister (5th January 1918).

In practice, however, during the remaining winter months of 1917/18 Haig adopted a defensive stance and both London and Paris prepared themselves for the German attack widely anticipated for the early Spring. This was delivered on 21 March on the British lines and its intensity and initial successes hurried the government into measures which overtook its previous military manpower planning. In terms of legislation they took the form of a new Military Service (No.2) Act, designed to speed up procedures already approved in the Military Service (No.1) Act, passed in late March. It also raised to fifty - in most cases - the upper age limit at which

men could be drafted. The second Bill was pushed through rapidly, in late April, since the House of Commons recognised the emergency.

Lloyd George succeeded in manoeuvring General Robertson out of his post in February, the first step in furtherance of his aim of exercising more direct control of Haig in the field, working through a C.I.G.S. more of his own way of thinking - General Wilson. Both men believed that Haig's policies produced too little in results for the cost paid in casualties. In private Lloyd George was very critical of the loss of life. Colonel Charles a Court Repington, the war correspondent first of The Times and then of the Morning Post reported him as saying that he was "not prepared to accept the position of butcher's boy driving cattle to the slaughter."<sup>12</sup> The date was 9th February 1917, when the Somme casualties were well known. Then, talking to C. P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, after hearing a description of life in the trenches from Philip Gibbs, a very well-known war reporter, Lloyd George observed: "If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know."<sup>13</sup> Again, on 27 August 1917 Lord Riddell, the newspaper owner, recorded that Lloyd George had said: "All these great offensives have been failures and one hesitates to think how many glorious lives have been sacrificed."<sup>14</sup> Hankey afterwards wrote that Lloyd George felt "humiliated" by the casualties incurred at the 3rd Ypres (just short of one quarter of a million), understandably since he had been determined to reverse a military strategy which was high-cost in casualties but yielded no commensurate victories. According to one of his sympathetic biographers - a journalist - Lloyd George's approval of the Flanders offensive was his "biggest blunder of the war".<sup>15</sup> We have already noted what

12. C. Repington, The First World War, Vol.I, p.455.

13. P. Knightley, The First Casualty, p.93.

14. J. M. McEwen, The Riddell Diaries, p.196.

15. F. Owen, Tempestuous Journey, p.397.

the Prime Minister wrote in his own War Memoirs about the 3rd Ypres. The fact was, however, that he was not politically strong enough, even after the Somme and Arras, to defy Haig, Robertson and the General Staff, with their supporters amongst the Conservatives and on the War Committee, and who on the whole had been in favour of giving Haig the permission he sought.

After the 3rd Ypres and the debacle at Cambrai, and with the onset of the manpower crisis, the Prime Minister was better placed to have his own way. In France, as has been noted, the British army remained on the defensive, lacking in any case the reserves to do otherwise, even had GHQ so desired. After the expected German attack, when the tide finally turned to permit the Allies to take the offensive, Lloyd George controlled Haig's scope for action quite closely. For example, General Wilson (who was the new C.I.G.S.) reporting to the Imperial War Cabinet (so-called because the Empire Prime Ministers were sitting with the British War Cabinet) on 13 August 1918, stated that Field Marshal Haig (whom Wilson had just visited in France) would not attack unless "they could advance without undue expenditure of life" - this was just after the battle of Amiens.<sup>16</sup> On 21 August Wilson told ministers that Haig would not move to take Bapaume "if it involved heavy loss."<sup>17</sup> Then on 31 August the C.I.G.S. specifically instructed the C-in-C not to attack the Hindenberg line if it would entail heavy loss. The reason given was that expenditure of life on that particular objective would awaken sad memories among the public. There were other reasons for not incurring casualties: one was, as Lord Alfred Milner (a member of the War Committee and now Secretary of State for War) told Haig, if the present British Army were "knocked about" there was not another to replace it.<sup>18</sup> Another reason was that there was now a growing belief that

16. CAB 23 7 457(i).

17. CAB 23 7 464(ii).

18. Callwell, op.cit., p.126.

the war had genuinely changed character and could be concluded in 1918 with an Allied victory which had not been considered possible before August. Britain would need as large an Army as possible when terms came to be discussed.<sup>19</sup>

In a speech on 18 January 1918 Lloyd George said "no democracy has ever long survived the failure of its adherents to die for it." The emphasis on sacrifice echoed the Queen's Hall speech delivered four years previously. It was made at a time of crisis in respect of manpower; its military counterpart was Haig's "backs to the wall" Order of the Day at a time of crisis for the Army in the field, three months later on 11 April. Thus, despite the casualties that had been incurred in nearly four years of war, neither leader saw in the environment, civilian or military, anything which would have made an appeal for more sacrifice, more casualties look out of place or intolerable. In the case of the Prime Minister, the evidence is that he had a strain in him which did indeed revolt at death and mutilation on the battle field, and it was this strain which was uppermost when he came to write his War Memoirs in 1933; but during the war itself the way the country accepted casualties permitted him to see the main issue as being whether the expenditure of manpower on the Western Front would bring real strategic advantages, perceivable at the time and leading to the prospect of victory, not whether men should be ordered to shed their blood in the mud on the ridges beyond Ypres.

Casualties were greater in 1917 than in 1916: 817,790 as against 644,436. As has been noted, the government was cautious about Haig's attacks during August 1918; thereafter the advance tended to become general but with the enemy retreating in good defensive order. Despite the casualties (some 350 thousand between 8th August and the end of the war - a bigger daily average than at the 3rd Ypres) it appeared the Allies were about to prevail. There was from then on no

19. Hankey, op.cit., Vol.II.

criticism from the government about the rate at which Haig was incurring casualties. With the real if unexpected prospect that the war would end in 1918, manpower resources were no longer a preoccupation.

## Chapter 5 - Casualties, the public and the press

General Joffre did not permit correspondents of newspapers to visit the battle front and Lord Kitchener at first followed his example. War correspondents were eventually given licence to report the fighting on the British front but in his time as Commander-in-Chief they were not much favoured by General Haig. Haig, indeed, did not make public the elements in his strategic thinking; in private communication he emphasised the importance of the "wearing down" phase of the long battle, which he afterwards considered the whole four and a half years of the war in France to be. Whilst it is possible to describe this as a strategy of attrition - and the word was used at the time (usure, the French called it) - it was not meant to signify accepting equal losses on both sides, resulting in the eventual victory of superior numbers. On the contrary, one of the root justifications of Haig's policy of urging offensive action whenever practicable was the firm belief - already mentioned - that in trench warfare the defender suffered more severely than the attacker.

Aiming to put out of action more of the enemy than the loss suffered by one's own side was a traditional military objective. It was, however, not easy to prove that the objective was being achieved: appearances and the time it was taking militated against acceptance of such proof as was offered. From the propaganda point of view, indeed, it was difficult, if not impossible to portray a policy of wearing down the German army in an attractive light when there was so much visual evidence of its counterpart in wartime Britain in the form of the casualty lists in the press and the presence among the populace of numerous military hospitals and the walking wounded on the streets. Yet it is hard to gauge to what extent the feelings induced in people's hearts and consciences by these reminders of the human cost of the conflict affected the nation's will to continue to wage war; and the difficulty is compounded by the uneven distribution of the suffering, both by geography and social class.

The population of the United Kingdom (which at that date included the whole of Ireland) at the census of 1911 was 45,222 thousand; at the census of 1921 it was 47,123 thousand. The total number of households or families for the U.K. is not given in the 1911 census but it is given for England and Wales: the figure was 7,943 thousand, whilst the figure for the total population of those two components of the U.K. was 36,070 thousand.<sup>1</sup> If we relate 7,943 to 36,070 and apply the resulting ratio to 45,222 we get a figure for the number of households in the U.K. in 1911 of just under 10 million. The number of men recruited in the U.K. for the armed services in the Great War was 4,971 thousand and the number of casualties, which has been variously estimated, may be taken as 2,471 thousand, of whom 704,803 were killed - but see Appendix. Thus, if we ignore the population increase between 1911 and the war years, these figures mean that slightly under one half of the households provided a man for the armed services, one in four households had a man wounded and one in thirteen a man killed. This was over the whole period of the war. Thus when an editorial in The Times on 1st January 1916 stated: "There is scarce a home in the country, from the highest to the poorest which does not grieve over its wounded, or mourn its dead" it could be rightly accused, certainly at that date, of stretching the truth.

In practice eligible males were not spread evenly over the number of households, nor were the households containing males who served spread evenly over the country. Just as slightly over 500 thousand of those killed were under 30 years of age, so also was there a concentration of casualties both in respect of geography and of social class. The former was particularly noticeable in the earlier years of the war, when regular army units were in action, since regular battalions usually recruited locally. This led, for example, to long casualty lists of Leicestershire men appearing in the Leicester Daily Mercury in late October and early November 1915 following on the Leicestershire Regiment's action at Loos

1. Census Returns, 1911 and 1921.

in September.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, voluntary enlistment in Kitchener's New Armies very often took place on a locality basis, so that when the so-called 'Pals' battalions fought on the Somme in 1916 and suffered severely there were heavy concentrations of casualties in many industrial cities, especially in the north. Such geographical bunching would have been even more pronounced had not the medical examiners graded so many town-dwellers as unfit: 10% of those tested for military service were put in Grade 4.

In social terms an historian has written:

The higher up in the social scale a man was, the greater were the chances that he would serve from early in the war and that he would do so in a combat unit [and] casualties were distributed in the British population in a way that was unfavourable to the well-to-do and the highly educated.[3]

Thus officers (who in general came from better-off homes), especially junior officers, had a proportionately higher casualty rate than other ranks; university graduates a higher rate than the national average of those serving (about 40%); and Oxbridge graduates a higher rate than that for all graduates serving. (One in four of Oxbridge graduates under 25 years of age was killed; one in five of public school bred officers.)<sup>4</sup> It was this disproportionate representation of the upper classes in the casualty figures, brought home by the often heavy weighting of the officer category in the casualty lists in the newspapers, which gave its significance to Lord Esher's observation that "Men and women (in high society) fuss more about casualty lists than the fate of our army." (He noted this on 27 August 1914, when only units of the Regular Army were fighting.)<sup>5</sup> There were occasional public references to the sacrifice of the "flower of our nation" (e.g. in the

2. Leicester Daily Mercury, 20 October and 3 November 1915.

3. J. H. Winter, The Great War and the British People, p.65.

4. Ibid., p.89.

5. O. Esher, Journals and Letters of Lord Esher, Vol.III, p.180.



House of Commons on 6th November 1917 when the 3rd Ypres was being fought)<sup>6</sup> but phrases of this type were commoner after the war than during it.

During the war casualties were communicated, man by man, by the Service Departments direct to next of kin, thereafter in batches on a virtually daily basis to the Press. Up to March 1916 the Prime Minister himself gave, in the House of Commons, almost monthly, the total casualties sustained by British forces overseas: e.g. on 8th February 1915 he stated that the total casualties had so far been 104 thousand. In March of that year Mr H. J. Tennant, the Under Secretary of State for War (the Secretary himself, Kitchener, being in the Lords), gave it as government policy to publish casualty lists as soon as possible after the names had been notified to the War Office and next of kin informed. But change was underway. For the last time in accordance with the custom thus far, Asquith, in a written answer on 27 January 1916, reported total accumulated casualties to the ninth of that month as 549,467 (400,500 in France). Then, in a memorandum dated 7th February 1916, the General Staff in London argued that too much information was reaching the enemy through the existing method of communicating casualties to the public; and at its meeting on 29 February the Cabinet agreed that henceforth casualties (after individual notification to next of kin) should be given in lists published regularly but only 30 days or more after the occurrence, omitting the date, battalion details and the theatre.<sup>7</sup>

In keeping with this new policy the Prime Minister declined on 1st March 1916 to give casualty figures on a regular basis,<sup>8</sup> declaring in answer to a further question on 8th May that information would be given privately to members, if requested. This position was maintained by successive

6. 98 H.C. Deb 5s 2019.

7. WO 32 15148.

8. 80 H.C. Deb 5s 1060.

governments until the end of the war, being confirmed on various occasions (e.g. by Lloyd George as Secretary of State for War on 21 August and 18 October 1916, by Bonar Law as Leader of the House on 20 July 1917). Members querying casualties were still referred individually to the War Office (written answer on 18 October 1917).<sup>9</sup> On 24 July 1917 J. Ian MacPherson, the Under Secretary of State for War in the Commons (once again the Secretary, Derby, was in the Lords), refused to give the first month's casualties for the Somme attack although it had taken place a full year before.<sup>10</sup> On 5th December 1917 the government refused to give weekly casualty figures even in a secret session of the House of Commons.<sup>11</sup> On 19 July 1917 in a written answer MacPherson stated - while refusing to give monthly casualty lists - that if the daily lists were added up, the picture regarding casualties would not be so inaccurate, although he warned that the lists included the lightly wounded but not men reporting sick.<sup>12</sup> (This was true - though it would be a belated truth - regarding the accumulated total. It would not have been possible to obtain an accurate figure for any individual offensive operation, e.g. the Somme, by such a method.)

There being no radio or television service throughout the war, "the dreaded casualty lists" as Tennant referred to them as early as 22 April 1915<sup>13</sup>, published almost daily in certain newspapers, constituted the principal official means of broadcasting casualties to the public at large. The paper with the largest circulation was not a daily but News of the World, published on a Sunday, which claimed a figure of over 2 million at the beginning of the war and over 3 million by the end. This circulation, the paper stated, was the largest in

9. 98 H.C. Deb 5s 278.

10. 96 H.C. Deb 5s 1103.

11. 100 H.C. Deb 5s 411.

12. 96 H.C. Deb 5s 602.

13. 71 H.C. Deb 5s 445.

the world - but it did not publish casualty lists. Nor did the other main Sunday paper, The Observer.

Of the national dailies, the Daily Mirror laid claim to a circulation "larger than any other picture paper in the world" but it did not give a figure, though this has been estimated at around 1 million. It did not print casualty lists, but occasionally gave total figures (e.g. on 17 September 1915 it gave the figures for the Dardanelles campaign) at a time when the War Office was still giving out figures by theatre of fighting. The Daily Sketch maintained it was "The Premier Picture Paper" but again did not give circulation figures; neither did it publish casualty figures on a regular basis, but it did often give the daily total figures for officers and other ranks, though not in a column or columns especially headlined indicatively, nor prominently displayed. Thus, on 15 April 1918 in a one inch column in the bottom right-hand corner of a page under the heading "Generals in the List" the totals of the casualty lists published over the previous week-end were given. The Daily Express claimed the second largest circulation in London but gave no figures; neither did it publish casualty lists.

The Times, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail all published casualty lists under the heading "Roll of Honour", almost daily. The Daily Mail gave no circulation figures and in the last year of the war, at least, gave only the names of the officer casualties; other ranks did not appear even as a grouped total. The Daily Telegraph (plus the Morning Post with which it merged in 1937) together had a circulation of 230 thousand and carried casualty lists throughout the war. The Times (circulation 150 thousand) also carried the casualty lists virtually daily from beginning to end, but after 10 May 1917 it stopped giving the names of Other Rank casualties because of a shortage of newsprint; their numbers were given in a group total. The Times frequently gave the names of some officers twice, since it would give the name of an officer reported to the paper privately, often with an obituary

notice, well in advance of the official notification of the death to the public.

Today the 'quality' newspapers give a multiple of about 2.3 to their circulation to obtain an idea of total readership. No figure is obtainable for the Great War, but if the three papers giving the casualty lists daily are taken together (and giving the Daily Mail a circulation of 500 thousand) but omitting the Daily Sketch, since it did not carry a daily Roll of Honour column, and using the slightly higher multiple of 2.5, papers giving prominence to casualties would have reached between two and two and a half million persons each weekday. This readership would have been concentrated in the educated sector of the population; the majority of the adults in the country who read or who were passed a national daily would have been looking at a paper which gave casualty figures irregularly or not at all. The national dailies were supplemented by a much greater number of local newspapers. An example of such, the Leicester Daily Mercury, started from the outbreak of war giving the full casualty lists as communicated by the Service Departments but by 1915 had changed to printing the names of Leicester and Leicestershire men only; it always gave however the names of casualties in any unit of the Leicestershire Regiment, regardless of where the men came from.

On account of the delay in publishing casualty figures and because of restrictions regarding the theatres where they were incurred, the newspapers did not - probably could not - tie up their war correspondent's reports of an action with any specific list of casualties. The headlines to the Roll of Honour columns were presumably sub-edited in London and used phrases like "Lengthy List" and "Heavy List"<sup>14</sup> and sometimes gave the number of names - particularly officers - in the list. Only where British casualties in an action were not such as to shock did they receive mention in the correspondent's report from the scene of the action itself:

14. Leicester Daily Mercury, 4 August and 20 October 1916.

e.g. "Our losses comparatively slight."<sup>15</sup> Early in 1915 Lloyd George had complained at a Cabinet meeting that the press had treated the progress of the war as one of almost unbroken success<sup>16</sup> - even when the facts could not support such an interpretation - and a reading of the newspaper columns confirms that this was so throughout the war. There are numerous examples. On 13 September 1914 the News of the World headlined one of its reports "Belgian Victories"; a year later the Daily Mirror presented the Battle of Loos as a British victory, although a month later it admitted that there had in fact been a loss of ground; on 4th December 1917 The Times described the German counter-attack at Cambrai as a "disastrous failure". The inaccuracy of the reporting was not confined to the battle front. As early as 2nd April 1915 The Times published an editorial on the parlous manpower situation in which Germany already found itself. In keeping with the official communiques from GHQ, all reporters emphasised the losses the German army was sustaining although The Times did, in another editorial on 23 October 1916, caution that "too much is being printed about German exhaustion in the West" (this was at the time of the German counter-attack on the Schwaben Redoubt during the Somme battles).

Although one historian of the medium has written that "The press during the First World War was far too powerful an institution for any government to control or repress"<sup>17</sup> the newspapers in general were not critical of the army. The Times in particular was unquestioning in respect of GHQ: in an editorial on 16 April 1917, for example, it stated "It is not necessary to explain why the Commander-in-Chief needs more men; it should be quite sufficient that he calls for them." The tendentious reporting of which Lloyd George complained led one journalist (an M.P.) to write after the war "there was no more discreditable period in the history of journalism than

15. The Times, 4 September 1915.

16. CAB 24 1 7.

17. G. Boyce, Newspaper History, p.307.

the four years of the Great War."<sup>18</sup> The de-emphasis of British casualties in wartime reporting was an aspect of this. Another journalist refers to the "inspired silence about the slaughter" due to

the correspondent's excusable identification with the cause and his less excusable incorporation into the military machine [with the result that] more deliberate lies were told than in any other period of history.[19]

As Lloyd George wrote:

If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know. The correspondents don't write and the censorship would not pass the truth.[20]

Even what the correspondents did write apparently carried no conviction with the soldiers doing the fighting: "The garbled accounts of the correspondents in France had done incalculable harm. Men, knowing the facts, rose up against that fancy literature." And again: "'You can't believe a thing you read' they said". But there is no means of knowing the extent of the circulation in France of English newspapers, though army papers printed in France were certainly read. In photographs of soldiers at rest, they rarely if ever seem to be reading at all but it is recorded that some of the officers received newspapers.

Indeed, in his War Memoirs Lloyd George writes that the "Policy of western holocaust was only tolerated by British public opinion owing to an elaborate system ... of suppressing casualties"; in particular at the time of 3rd Ypres.<sup>21</sup> In a War Office memorandum it was admitted that by August 1917, when 3rd Ypres was in progress, there were arrears in

18. M. L. Sanders and P. M. Taylor, British Propaganda in the First World War 1914-18, p.30.

19. Knightley, op.cit., p.64.

20. See p.36, note 13.

21. Lloyd George, op.cit., Vol.II, p.1313.

publishing casualties which were never cleared up.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless a study of the numbers of casualties published by the War Office beginning the last third of August (when the 3rd Ypres losses started to come through) and continuing until mid-January 1918 (which therefore covered the action at Cambrai) reveals that the daily number never fell below 1,500 all ranks and was, on the great majority of days, over 3 thousand and frequently between 4 and 6 thousand. The highest numbers recorded came in 1918: 7,930 on 14 May, 7,848 on 17 October.

In general it may fairly be concluded that the press directed its readers' attention away from British casualties. (Photographs of British dead were not published even in the 'pictorial' papers.) Those who read the 'quality' papers daily would have gained an idea not too far from the truth of the continuing cost of the war in human terms and from their social class came the officers who proportionately suffered most; but the circulation of such papers was small. The papers which had a circulation approaching what would later be termed 'mass' gave no prominence to casualty figures or omitted them altogether. Total calculated readership numbers indicate that the majority of adults did not read a paper at all. Thus, the social classes which provided the greater number of casualties in absolute terms would not have been aware, through the medium of the press, of the number of losses nationwide.

22. WO 32 15148.

## Chapter 6 - The impact of casualties at home

Communication by the soldiers themselves provided another channel of information to the public on casualties but various factors combined to subtract from the effectiveness of this medium. Telephones from behind the lines to England were not available to the soldiery; the press stopped printing letters from army personnel after early 1915; whilst all home-directed mail was censored and eventually the bulk of it took the form of pre-printed post cards which gave a minimum of personal information about the sender only. The channel consisted, then, of verbal communication by soldiers on leave from the front and by those invalided home.

In attempting to gauge the impact on the public of information on casualties conveyed by word of mouth, it is clear that its force was softened by its diffusion over time and, despite certain concentrations in terms of place up to early 1917, by geographical spread. Further, whilst noting the words of the M.P. in the House in November 1917<sup>1</sup>, leave was awarded only after twelve to fifteen months service for other ranks in the first years of the war; officers for various reasons, including attendance at training courses and the fact that they were permitted to travel alone, appeared to get home more often. However, the number of communicators capable of speaking from first-hand experience - perhaps one half of an army of slightly over five million serving at some time during the war - was not great alongside the number in a total population of over 45 million who may have wished to hear what they had to say.

In this context it should also be noted that Imperial troops played an increasingly prominent part in the fighting in France from the late Somme battles onwards: there were ten Empire divisions there in 1917/18 and their names are associated with major actions: e.g. the Canadians at Vimy and Passchendaele, the Australians at Pozieres and Bullecourt,

1. See p.35, footnote 11.



etc. The homes of these men were, obviously, not in the U.K. Finally, the unwillingness of many soldiers to discuss their experiences and the lack of interest and understanding among the public at large about what they had to say is evidenced by diaries written up at the time and in accounts composed afterwards.<sup>2</sup> This well-attested circumstance would have detracted from the usefulness of soldiers' accounts in creating a vivid impression of high casualty rates.

For these reasons, soldiers returning from the line (stretches of which were quiet for weeks on end)<sup>3</sup> over the length of the war and dispersing to homes all over the country cannot have constituted a conveyor belt of casualty information fed regularly into the public conscience with accumulating effect.

If returning soldiers appeared not to reach out with information on casualties to the public, neither did the populace at large seek solace and sympathy for their losses in religion - not in the established church, at least. "At the beginning of the war" as the historian of the Church of England in the Great War writes, "it was widely asserted that a religious revival was under way."<sup>4</sup> Special days of prayer were frequent and in later years street shrines sprang up, particularly in the East end of the capital (which had been bombed by Zeppelins and Gothas), which were dedicated by bishops. Yet even by late 1915 it had become "apparent that a religious revival was not occurring".<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as could be expected, the civilian population became accustomed to the presence of wounded men in their midst. Visiting Brighton in June 1917, Caroline Playne wrote:

the sight of hundreds of men on crutches going about in groups, many having lost one leg, many others both legs,

1. P. Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, p.174.
2. T. Ashworth, Trench Warfare, passim.
3. A. Wilkinson, The Church of England and the First World War, p.71.
4. Ibid., p.72.

caused sickening horror. The maiming of masses of strong, young men thus brought home was appalling.

Yet, she says, people, though at first horrified, got used to such sights so that there was a "hardening and coarsening of national life."<sup>6</sup> The arrival of hospital trains was noted routinely in the local press and the Daily Mirror gave its readers in large advertisements directions on how to travel to the thirteen military hospitals in east and south-east London. Casualties had, thus, become part of the daily round.

The greater part of the population did not, then, turn to the Church to give expression to their grief. The war did not arrest the decline in church-going which had been in train among the urban working class (which provided the bulk of the casualties) since the 1880s. The Church laboured on "steadily amid a huge indifference" and "the war revealed the extent of the alienation of the majority of the English male population from the life and practice of the Churches."<sup>7</sup> There is no evidence to show that things stood differently with females. Mourning was much in evidence; nevertheless "many thousands were grieving for the loss of fathers, brothers and sons in a cause which they were not prepared to believe was futile".<sup>8</sup> National support for the war remained: whilst conscription was necessarily introduced to ensure the numbers the Army required, out of the five million men recruited for the Army, 3,600 thousand were volunteers.

Final figures for casualties during the war would show that if they had incided evenly over four years, 600 thousand out of ten million households would have been stricken annually. In fact, the annual casualties grew from 95,654 in 1914 to 830,861 in 1918, so that an increasing number of households was affected each year; at the same time the passage of the years brought about the substitution of memory

5. Ibid., p.170.

6. Ibid., Introduction, p.6.

7. Haste, Keep the Home Fires Burning, p.155.

for the nearness of loss. Thus, on 13 October 1917, with the fighting at 3rd Ypres still heavy, the Leicester Daily Mercury had a full-page spread in commemoration of the Battle of Loos, two years before, during which the Leicestershire Regiment had distinguished itself at the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The headline was "Lest We Forget". Further, the heaviest daily casualty rate was experienced during the last four months of the war when, however, War Office communiques could point to, and war correspondents describe, measurable territorial advances by British troops; and expect belief. The cost in terms of lives was at last being compensated by success in the field: the Germans were retreating and it was visible on the map. Finally, account must be taken of the fact that the greater percentage of casualties were the wounded of whom the majority returned to service but not necessarily to action. The Prime Minister, in the House on 11 February 1915, put the figure of returning wounded at 60%. Thus of the one in four households which had a man wounded, only one in more than eight was so badly stricken that he could not return to the army.

Through what many of their number read in the press and heard from soldiers and others, and from what they saw about them, the civilian population must have been, over the fifty one months of the war, generally aware that considerable casualties were being sustained. The families of approximately 1,500 thousand men (out of nearly 12 million males aged 15-49 years) knew of death or severe mutilation. Proportionately the concentration was highest in the social classes which provided many of the officers, where family, church, school and university all held to the concept of patriotic service. 118,941 officers were casualties on the Western Front, about one third being killed. Although numbers of casualties in absolute terms were heavier in the classes which provided the bulk of the soldiers, the concentration was less and the dispersal of sorrow wider. Casualties were a dull recurrent ache in different strengths at different times in separate parts of the nation's body, not a non-stop, acute and overall agony.

## Chapter 7 - Casualties and the fighting soldier

Those who wrote in prose and from personal experience of the war did not adopt a strident tone when, (which was frequently), they described men being killed and wounded. As familiarity with the wounded in Britain hardened civilian sensibilities, so did witnessing the effects of high explosive, gas and bullets on friend and enemy alike conduce to an unsentimental attitude in the soldiers involved. This was particularly so when men were killed outright.

Two reasons may be found for this circumstance. First, many of the infantry (four out of every five men killed were infantrymen) were drawn from social environments where death was not an unfamiliar occurrence. They were, as one historian puts it, products of the lower orders of Edwardian Britain, and as such deferential subjects with uncultivated minds - i.e. unimaginative and easily brutalised.<sup>1</sup> (Though Lloyd George's description of the composition of Kitchener's armies should be recalled in this context.<sup>2</sup>) Second, the conditions of combat had an intimate effect on a man's nervous state and reactions especially the profound lassitude they induced, on which all diarists are agreed; battle fatigue, as it is now termed. "... tiredness and mental strain eliminate all but the most acute terrors. The senses grow numb through over-work."<sup>3</sup>

This blunting of at least the outward feelings of the combatants may be sensed in many of the diaries kept at the time and in accounts written later. Conditions were not usually such as to permit acts of mourning at the scene of death - and they would in any case have been displeasing to those in authority. "The soldier must not be encouraged to

1. D. Winter, Death's Men, p.230.

2. See p.10, footnote 4.

3. R. B. Talbot Kelly, A Subaltern's Odyssey, p.99.

indulge in introspection ... He must, in his own consciousness, live from day to day rather than, in anticipation, die a thousand deaths" sums up the attitude the commanders wished to inculcate.<sup>4</sup> In the R.F.C., pilots had the opportunity to let their feelings show:

When casualties ... occurred the Squadron showed no sorrow to the casual visitor, although often a member would secretly retire to his own room to shed a silent tear.

"However", wrote one of the airmen, on one occasion "the C.O. made a little speech, the main theme of which was that Death must never affect our morale and that everyone must cast sorrow aside."<sup>5</sup> "You couldn't do anything about the dead and there were so many bodies about that you got callous about it."<sup>6</sup> "One picks up a man with his brains blown out ... and five minutes after we have forgotten the pitiful sight."<sup>7</sup> Even the poet Graves wrote: "One can disregard a dead man."<sup>8</sup>

Death, whether something that happened to others or threatened oneself, was not it seems from most accounts, the prime fear: it was the prospect of mutilation which frightened men most, to the extent that they allowed themselves to think about such matters at all. The diaries often mention soldiers who fervently desired a "Blighty" wound - i.e. a wound serious enough for them to be invalided home - but as was shown by the grim stories which circulated, to invite a "Blighty" was too hazardous and wounding too repugnant to become common practice. This also helps explain the slight incidence of self-inflicted wounds, although for a man deliberately to disable himself was a court-martial offence. Wounds could be slight or serious, wounded men were expected

4. F. Evans, 'Some factors affecting military morale', R.U.S.I. Journal, Vol.LXXVII, 1942.
5. I. Jones, King of Air Fighters, p.188.
6. L. Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, p.169.
7. H. Williamson, A Soldier's Diary of the Great War, p.114.
8. R. Graves, Goodbye to All That, p.98

to fight on and it was a grave military offence to stop to assist a wounded man during an attack. Nevertheless, this indifference to human suffering made some individuals very intolerant of the war: "If the people could see what I've seen and experience what I experienced last night, this war would stop. They wouldn't have it."<sup>9</sup> The people at home obviously could not see what the Corporal saw and as Lloyd George remarked<sup>10</sup>, neither was it reported to them.

The British Army in France never refused to fight. Partly this was a matter of discipline:

We knew it was pointless before we went over, crossing open ground like that. But you had to go ... If you go forward, you'll likely be shot. If you go back, you'll be court-martialled and shot.[11]

"...almost every week there were men shot. The orders were to be read out to the troops, to stiffen them."<sup>12</sup> According to one legal historian, 304 men were court-martialled and shot for military offences (i.e. excluding murder) during the war and their names were in fact detailed in Part II of the Daily Orders of all units.<sup>13</sup> In addition, an unknown number of men were shot by officers, NCOs and the military police. Graves reported a fellow officer as saying "In both of the last two shows I had to shoot a man of my company to get the rest out of the trench" but Graves added that he was unlucky in his unit: most men did not require such drastic action to get them over the top of the parapet. However, there are indications in other accounts that the officer concerned was not describing an isolated incident.

Ironically, the casualty rate itself reinforced progress towards the end to which discipline worked: which was to make

9. Macdonald, Somme, p.216.

10. See page 36, footnote 13.

11. Macdonald, Somme, p.157.

12. Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, p.140.

13. Babington, For the Sake of Example, App.I.

men expose themselves to danger on command. Moran (a medical officer in the Great War, Churchill's doctor in the Second World War) believed that willingness to risk life and limb was a wasting asset, reducing a soldier's effectiveness over time. This, then, gave value to drafts of fresh men filling the gaps left by casualties in the ranks of those still in the line. Indeed, one military historian<sup>14</sup> argues that casualties were always creating a need for more drafts and that it was such men, untried in combat, who enabled the British Army to go on the offensive in August 1918 (as it was their lack of training which could in part explain the heavy casualty rate in those attacks).

Finally, an attempt to assess the impact of the casualty rate on the fighting soldiers themselves must acknowledge the fact that each man's personal awareness of what was happening around him, of other men being wounded or killed was, by the circumstances of an action, spatially limited and over time, infrequent. Whilst commanders varied in their zeal in rotating battalions through the fire, support and reserve trenches when an attack was not in progress, it was unusual for a unit to spend more than about three weeks in the zone where hostile artillery fire could normally be expected, before being relieved. In an attack relief would usually be forthcoming in the matter of a day or so, as a matter of necessity. In an Operations Report, under the heading "Endurance" and covering the first days of July 1916, 17th Division stated that men could only remain effective for "48 hours at a stretch if much was going on". Soldiers on one section of the hundred and forty miles front did not know what was going on in another; even in individual operations - to the extent that, for example, the Somme or 3rd Ypres, extending over miles and many months, may be so termed - units were ignorant of what was happening elsewhere. The large War Memorials with their long, seemingly interminable lists of names, even when commemorating only one series of battles, overwhelm the imagination by

14. J. Baynes, Morale, p.100.

giving the sense that all the casualties happened at the same time and in the same place: the Somme, Ypres are the most famous. By contrast the accounts of engagements by those who fought in them are more particular, more episodic: they do not convey that magnitude of slaughter to which the war memorials seem to give silent witness

Thus, despite the casualties incurred in active trench warfare, with constant raiding by both sides, and the set-piece battles interspersed between them, the impact on the British and Empire armies was never such as to cause anything equivalent to the mutinies which broke out amongst the French after the failure of Nivelle's costly attacks on the Aisne in April 1917. Individual fears did not accrete and build up a frightened army. Commands were obeyed. "To go out in those conditions was utter suicide but the General had ordered it, so that was that."<sup>15</sup>

15. Macdonald, Somme, p.323.



## Chapter 8 - The High Command and casualties

An important aspect of Terraine's Great Casualty Myth<sup>1</sup> is the belief that British generals in the Great War were heedless of the lives of their soldiers. The statistics show, however, that at least by comparison with France and Germany, this was not the case: of men mobilised, French casualties were 16.8%, German 15.4% and British 11.8%; of men between ages 15-45, French casualties were 13.3%, German 12.5% and British 6.3%. In the practice of war British generals were typical of the military of their time and in one respect, indeed, their thinking was no different from that of their successors today: the primacy of the doctrine of offence. "Troops acting on the defensive are bound to lose ground now and then and, in course of time, the war. That is why all soldiers and sailors hate it."<sup>2</sup> Thus General Robertson in 1917. "But the successful defeat of invasion will never be achieved by defensive action. Successful defeat of invasion will be achieved by offensive action."<sup>3</sup> General Montgomery in 1942.

It is essential to get on to the offensive as soon as possible. No battle is ever won by remaining on the defensive although there are those about who preach a form of defensive defence only. There is no such thing. If we become involved in a battle of attrition with an enemy of superior numbers when our resources are limited, we are doomed to lose.[4]

There were various reasons for the displacement of Field-Marshal French from command of the B.E.F. in December 1915 but there is no evidence that desire to have a more offensive-minded general was one of them. His successor, General Haig, did nevertheless subscribe to the doctrine that to take the offensive was the only way to win. Admiral Nelson is said to have observed that the captain who lays his ship alongside

1. See p.13, footnote 10.
2. V. Bonham Carter, Soldier True, p.181.
3. N. Hamilton, Monty, Vol.I, p.476.
4. M. Farndale, RUSI Journal, Autumn 1988

that of the enemy cannot be far wrong and Haig transposed a similar principle of aggressive action to land warfare. Churchill quotes J. H. Boraston, an early editor of Haig's despatches, as giving the following statement of this principle: "Gather together every man and gun and wear down the enemy by constant and if possible ceaseless attacks."<sup>5</sup> In his own essay on Haig, Churchill quotes the general as saying that he had "a sincere desire to engage the enemy." Churchill goes on to comment that senior officers serving under Haig who did not evince the same spirit were dismissed "for refusing to order - not to lead, for that would have been easier - their troops to certain destruction."<sup>6</sup> Churchill's conclusion on Haig was that if he was not up to his job, there was no one any better.

The purpose of offensive action was to eliminate, by disablement or capture, the enemy's army: taking possession of enemy-held ground was not an integral part of the objective, though an attack might force a breach and promote subsequent territorial advance. Encirclement of the French armies was a purpose of the Schlieffen Plan as originally conceived; to kill as many French soldiers as possible was General Erich von Falkenhayn's motive in attacking at Verdun. Joffre had territorial objectives - to eject the German army from France and Belgium - and believed this could be achieved only by constant attacks, hence his offensives in 1914 and 1915 and those planned for 1916. Nivelle, his successor, had the same end in view, only he proposed to gain it within forty-eight hours by a massive thrust rather than by mounting attacks over weeks and months. Thus, he wrote to Haig on 21 December 1916 that the objective of the offensive in 1917, then being planned, was "to destroy the main body of the enemies' armies on the Western Front. This can only be achieved after a decisive battle."<sup>7</sup> Similarly General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commanding

5. Churchill, The World Crisis, p.957.

6. Parker, Famous British Generals.

7. O.H. App. 1917, p.4.

the 4th Army at the Somme, in submitting his plans to the C.-in-C. wrote: "Our object rather seems to be to kill as many Germans as possible with the least loss to ourselves."<sup>8</sup> He meant that conquest of ground was not the objective. There was indeed no strategic purpose, from the British point of view in attacking at that point along the Allied line but it had the advantage, as originally planned, that since it encompassed the junction between the French and British armies, it made possible joint attacks in strength. The strategic purpose of attack on the Somme eventually became, as the British saw it, the relief of the pressure on the French at Verdun. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that both at the Somme and at 3rd Ypres Haig, whilst not at all discounting the part to be played by artillery and infantry in "wearing down" his opponents, also had his eyes on what Rawlinson called (in deprecation) "distant objectives" - that is, territorial gains of strategic moment. ('Romantic' Montgomery would presumably have termed them, in the sense that they were unrealistic because out of reach).

Apart from the belief, common to both Allied and Central Powers, that the only sure way to victory was to defeat the other side's army through offensive action, for the British there were two other considerations which impelled them to a strategy of attack. The first was stated by Field-Marshal French in a letter to Lord Kitchener written on 11 June 1915:

It is obvious that a defensive attitude on the part of the Allies in the West at the present time will allow Germany to take full advantage of her central position ... [therefore] to obtain a decisive success it is necessary to have sufficient men and sufficient ammunition to be able to attack at more than one point and to keep on attacking for a prolonged period.[9]

Politicians and generals of the Allied Powers alike shared this view, not only in 1915 but during the whole of the war. Where they disagreed was on the points at which, on the periphery of the Central Powers, the attacks should be made.

8. WO 158 321.

9. WO 158 21.

General Robertson was in accord with the military historian who later wrote: "if the stronger side did not attack on the Western Front it played into the hands of the weaker."<sup>10</sup> The General himself stated in a memorandum for the War Committee on 23 February 1917 that the essence of the struggle was now one of resources, principally manpower, with Germany's central position giving her an advantage; but the men available for her army would begin to reduce as from autumn of that year. Thus "Victory will rest with that side which displays the greatest resolution and endurance."<sup>11</sup> In the second half of 1917, after the failure of Nivelle, with the French armies debilitated by casualties and mutiny, with Russia out of the war and Italy an uncertain force, fear of the advantage bestowed on Germany by her central position became acute. The strategic situation indicated a British offensive, as the Army and, indeed, the majority of the War Committee in London saw it.

The second factor which insistently urged regular officers to adopt offensive tactics lay in the need to sustain the morale and fighting spirit of the citizen soldier. "Malaise, ennui, boredom ... is in war an important cause of reduced efficiency and drive among soldiers. Here again, action is the remedy."<sup>12</sup> "Reduced efficiency and drive" could be translated as unwillingness to go into and continue with an attack, an understandable attitude of mind in an army recently recruited from civilian life but one which the commanders knew, nevertheless, they had to eradicate.

It was not that senior officers early in the war had no concept of what the cost of fighting would be. On the eve of the first battle of Ypres (16 October 1914) Haig as a Corps commander wrote to his then divisional commander, Rawlinson:

10. C. Falls, The First World War, p.150.

11. WO 158 22.

12. F. Evans, 'Some factors affecting military morale', R.U.S.I. Journal, Vol.LXXVII, London 1942.

"The results of failure in this war would be so terrible for England that all must be prepared to submit to severe losses."<sup>13</sup> The B.E.F. then consisted of regular army units; and the regular army, especially the Other Ranks, was regarded by the nation as a society apart from everyday life. 'The men', as distinct from the officers, were not held in high social regard and casualties among them would not cause distress among the civilian population at home. When, however, those civilians themselves were called upon to provide recruits for the Army, it was appreciated that casualties would be viewed differently. Thus General Robertson wrote, after the attack at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, that

the losses [they were about 13 thousand] have been less than half the losses suffered by us in purely objective fighting about Ypres. The attitude of the British mind at home [Robertson was at that time serving on French's staff] appears to be that any loss in defence may be joyfully accepted as a sign of true bulldog tenacity against odds but that losses incurred in attack are lamentable and unjustifiable, unless the attack ends in the complete and decisive defeat of the enemy.[14]

The generals were given no cause to believe that the soldiers of the New Armies would be demotivated by the losses they experienced. What concerned the senior commanders was whether their more junior officers had the training to avoid casualties among the men they were leading. An unnumbered document written by a staff officer on 28 May 1915 deplored a policy of "holding tenaciously to all ground irrespective sometimes of what may seem to be its immediate value" since this led to "losing heavily in life" which in turn resulted in the experienced officers and other ranks losing faith in their leaders, with the inexperienced "beginning to think that their first duty is bravely to be killed: not to kill."<sup>15</sup> This basic lack of training disadvantaged the New Armies in comparison with the Germans, with their peacetime conscription and service with the reserve, at least in the early years of

13. Duff Cooper, Haig, p.98.

14. WO 158 17.

15. Ibid.

the war. One of Haig's recipes for overcoming this - and for inculcating the offensive spirit - was constant trench raiding, which increased considerably after he took command of the B.E.F.<sup>16</sup> and presumably helped contribute towards the high estimate for normal wastage of over 500 thousand in 1917, with a similar figure for 1918.

Such activities and the large set-piece attacks interspersed between them, did not amount to planned attrition in the arithmetical sense which Churchill implies when he wrote of "grim calculations [made] to prove that in the end the Allies would still have a balance of a few million to spare."<sup>17</sup> Indeed General Robertson had written on 15 June 1915 "there is nothing to show that a continuance of the policy of slow attrition will bring the war to such a conclusion as we desire."<sup>18</sup> It is not known whether he had Joffre's policies in mind when he wrote those words but the description fitted the French commander's strategy. Robertson advocated instead attacks which brought to bear overwhelming superiority in men - meaning, in firepower. Hence the Army's constant complaint that never sufficient numbers of men were made available to them on the Western front.

Whatever tactics were adopted, however, casualties were an inescapable by-product of warfare, to be minimised but ineluctably suffered. Politicians, by their disinclination to countenance battle field losses after they had committed their country to war, were willing the end without willing the means, as the soldiers saw it. General Wilson put it thus in his diary: "The loss of men might have been a good reason for not entering into the war but a bad reason for not fighting when in the war."<sup>19</sup>

16. Ashworth, op.cit., p.180.

17. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.I, p.463.

18. WO 158 17.

19. Callwell, op.cit., p.4.

There is no evidence, on the other hand, in the plans for military operations in France throughout the war of an evaluation of objectives, strategic or tactical, in terms of casualties expected. Thus, the benefits flowing from, e.g., the occupation of Vimy ridge were not weighed as being worth X number of killed and wounded. Once the desirability and capability (usually assessed in terms of artillery and reserves) of attaining an objective was decided - and until 3rd Ypres this was left to the generals at GHQ - it was for the individual armies to calculate the force required for the actual battle. The number of men sent into an attack was a matter of judgment involving a multiplicity of factors among which were prominent an estimate of the strength of the enemy defences, a decision on which tactical approach would afford the most effective manner of overcoming them and a sufficiency of reserves to provide for the unexpected and from which replacements could be drawn. Replacements there would necessarily be, since tired units could not be long left in place after they had completed their attack.

The original judgment regarding the numbers required in an attack was sometimes expressed in terms of density of men on the ground. At Loos the 21st and 24th divisions were sent into attack on a front of 1200 yds, giving ten men per yard.<sup>20</sup> On the Somme, General Rawlinson wrote in his first plan dated 3rd April 1916: "... for [an] attack of this nature [i.e. considering the ground and enemy defences] which may have to continue for a fortnight or more, 8-9 men a yard is none too much."<sup>21</sup>

To the north of Rawlinson's 4th Army, the 3rd Army under General Allenby was instructed by Haig to put in a diversionary attack at Gommecourt. In indicating to Allenby what he had in mind, the C-in-C contrasted the diversionary attack with a decisive attack where the aim was to break through the

20. WO 158 264.

21. WO 158 321.

enemy's line of defence: in the latter "... it is necessary to consider the width of the breach...and then work backwards to ascertain ... the number of troops required."<sup>22</sup> Two divisions were allocated to the Gommecourt attack but it is not recorded how this number of men was arrived at: whether it was the lengths of the two sides of the triangle along each of which a division would attack or whether two divisions were all 3rd Army could spare whilst still responsible for the rest of its line. It was known, however, that Gommecourt was extremely strongly defended but probable casualties are not mentioned in the plans.

Similarly when General Kiggell (Haig's Chief of Staff) sent directives to Generals Rawlinson and Gough, commanding the 4th and Reserve Armies respectively, regarding continuance of the attacks on the Somme on 4th and 6th July 1916,<sup>23</sup>; and when General Harington (General Plumer's Chief of Staff at 2nd Army) sent orders to the Canadian Corps entrusted with the assault on the Passchendaele ridge on 13th October 1917,<sup>24</sup> the number of men they should contemplate expending was not mentioned.

However, provision for the medical care of casualties was planned before an attack. At Loos, an Advanced Operating Centre was set up, near the battle area, to supplement the Casualty Clearing Station; for the Somme and 3rd Ypres, 15 Casualty Clearing Stations were put in place, with a contingency plan to increase the medical teams from the normal eight medical officers to twenty-two per C.C.S. For the former offensive it was estimated that the medical services could handle, for the 4th Army, 24 thousand wounded daily; for the latter, for the 5th Army, 20 thousand a day. Except on a few days, these were overestimates. The planning of the provision of medical services was not in practice expected to

22. WO 158 221.

23. WO 158 234.

24. WO 158 209.



be exact, as is illustrated by the instructions given by GHQ to an Army Commander who was to communicate to his Director of Medical Services "as much of his plans as he feels justified in communicating" - GHQ fearing that preparations which were too precise would reveal the plan of attack.<sup>25</sup>

In practice an attack was pushed on until either the objective was reached or it had passed beyond the resources of the attacking unit to attain it. Attacking units were set territorial objectives, corresponding to a line drawn on a map, which had to be reached by a certain time. Such objectives had to be identifiable on the ground, tactically coherent with the overall plan of attack and clearly understood by field artillery (the most destructive arm of all in both offence and defence). However, communications throughout the war were inadequate, leading to loss of control of the units involved and consequent errors, compounded by inexperienced staff officers and lack of troop training in a hastily expanded B.E.F.

Casualties were, understandably, unevenly sustained as between divisions attacking on fronts from ten to seventeen miles wide but it seemed generally accepted that if a unit lost more than half of the number with which it had mounted the attack, it was reckoned incapable of undertaking further operations. There are numerous situation reports like that of 37 Brigade on 3rd July 1916, in which it stated that due to heavy loss it had failed to take the German second line of defence.<sup>26</sup>

Where enemy resistance proved unyielding, a pause was ordered and a new plan made before the attack was resumed - as happened with the 4th Army on the Somme in mid-July 1916 and the 5th and 2nd Armies at 3rd Ypres in September 1917. Even the normally optimistic Haig drew back from ordering an attack

25. O.H. (Medical Series), Vols. I & II passim.

26. WO 158 327.

in an unpromising situation e.g. on 11 July 1916, early in the Somme offensive, notwithstanding the pleas of Generals Rawlinson and Horne (the Army and Corps commanders respectively) the C-in-C refused to authorise a night attack on Longueval stating that he "could not approve of a night operation ... as the chance of failure and the loss of the divisions engaged would be too great."<sup>27</sup> (Nevertheless on other occasions when aggressively inclined local commanders pressed their case, Haig permitted his desire for offensive action to overcome his tactical doubts - e.g. by authorising Gough to proceed in November 1916, at the end of the Somme attacks.)

The Official History summed up Haig's view as being that although "breaking through the German defences was taking longer and proving more expensive in men and munitions than had been foreseen, [this] did not divert [him] from his strategic purpose." GHQ France was able to persuade the government in London, up to December 1917, that it had a valid strategic purpose, within the framework of which, as they went along, the casualty rate was acceptable. The estimated wastage rate apart, however, there was, as we have noted, no expected casualty figure for each individual offensive. In practice, due to conditions on the battle field it was virtually impossible to gain an accurate idea of what casualties were being sustained once the action had started. On the first day of the Somme attack the Army Commander believed casualties were 16 thousand when in fact they were over 57 thousand.<sup>28</sup> The daily situation reports from units in an attack were understandably imprecise when it came to giving casualty numbers: the action at Quadrilateral Trench on 8th July 1916 (the Somme offensive) failed because the Yorkshire Regiment had "suffered rather heavily." In the same attack, 69 Brigade reported that in its actions at Horseshoe Trench on 4th-6th July and at Contalmaison on 10-11 July its "casualties

27. Ibid.

28. O.H. France & Belgium 1916, Vol.I, p.480.

... were heavy but not excessive considering the importance of the operations."<sup>29</sup>

Commanders at all levels, in fact, usually preferred an unquantified description of the casualties they were sustaining and employed epithets rather than figures in attempting what would now be called a cost/benefit analysis of the operation under discussion. At the Somme, Haig writing to Robertson on 1st August gave his opinion that so far in the offensive the losses "cannot be regarded as unduly heavy"<sup>30</sup>; and later, on 7th October he wrote "Wastage of personnel in such operations as we are engaged on is necessarily severe."<sup>31</sup> There is no evidence that the C-in-C was asked what exactly he meant by his words. Haig did, however, attempt to be more precise about the number of the enemy his troops had put out of action. On 1st August reporting on the Somme offensive so far, Haig estimated German casualties as 130 thousand, having said his own total was about 120 thousand. (In both cases he apparently meant that the figures given were over and above those for normal wastage.)<sup>32</sup> In December 1917, writing to Robertson, he estimated German casualties so far that year at 995,620 based upon the number of casualties a division sustained when it was engaged in battle (3,500) in addition to normal wastage.<sup>33</sup>

Such calculations fitted GHQ's thesis that defence in modern warfare was more expensive in men than the offence. Writing on 18 June 1917 in support of his argument for an offensive in Flanders, Haig stated:

29. WO 158 327.

30. WO 158 21.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. WO 158 23.

Success in the first stage alone will improve our position round Ypres so greatly that the saving in normal casualties there during the winter will probably far more than counter-balance the casualties to be expected in capturing the objectives aimed at. Moreover, from the experience of previous attacks made by us this year, the German casualties in defence are likely to exceed ours in attack.[34]

On 1st May 1917, with the Flanders offensive already in prospect, Haig had already written of his attacks so far that year that "all reports ... are that the enemy's losses are far higher than ours"<sup>35</sup> and in his verbal exposition of his plans in London next month, before the War Committee, he stressed that ground taken was not to be the criterion by which the action should be judged. (There was, all the same, more than a hint of those "distant objectives".)

In the event, as we have seen, the War Cabinet confirmed in June/July 1917 that the major military effort was to be made on the Western Front (with the possibility of an attack on the subsidiary Southern Front in Italy) and that this should take the form, as the C-in-C proposed, of an offensive in Flanders. Other than the figures for wastage given at the beginning of the year and already estimated (and questioned) for 1918 there is no evidence that GHQ was held to any figure on casualties for the 3rd Ypres battle. Had such a criterion been imposed it would have constituted a quite novel departure from previous practice. The most that the Prime Minister could manage in the matter of controlling his C-in-C, as we have seen, was to direct that there should be a review of progress made. This came to nothing because in practice the decision as to whether to continue the offensive had to be in the hands of GHQ: at 3rd Ypres, as at the Somme, there were successes among the failures, so an overall judgement in the first weeks could have been held to be premature. Then there came the decision to transfer the thrust of attack from one army to another, so that Plumer had to be given the chance to

34. WO 158 24.

35. WO 158 22.

succeed with his different tactics where Gough had failed. It would in any case have been dangerous for the War Office in London to order Haig to call off the attack since they would have run the considerable risk of leaving units on the ground in a disadvantageous tactical position. (Since casualties incurred were not to be a measurement of success or failure, post-war practice of justifying the 3rd Ypres offensive on the grounds that the average daily wastage was less than at the Somme - 2,121 as compared with 2,950 - is dubious since such a calculation could only be made after the event. There is no evidence on record that the Somme casualties were used in planning the Flanders offensive.)

Haig was convinced that the German army in Flanders was required to make extreme exertions to defend itself and he based his opinion on the number of divisions which the enemy had to commit to battle more than once - i.e. they were re-using tired men because they were running out of reserves. (He had taken the same line in July 1916 at the Somme when he wrote: "in one month Germany has had to put in nearly as many divisions to resist our offensive as she employed herself during five months in her own effort to take Verdun.")<sup>36</sup> Again, as at the Somme, it was Haig who took the decision to close down the 3rd Ypres attacks: given the weather and the German artillery strength on the southern part of the front, he could get no further. There is nothing to show that he, or anyone else at the time, thought the casualties inordinate. It was the conditions under which the soldiers were fighting which drew comment, in the press and generally. Thus, Geddes's words in the House of Commons two months later<sup>37</sup> must have been chosen with attention: he did not hint that the Army was embarked on a strategy of conscious attrition but that their tactics were careless about life and thoughtless about casualties. General Plumer, whose 2nd Army had taken over the major role at 3rd Ypres from Gough's 5th Army, wrote

36. WO 158 21.

37. See p.35, footnote 11.

the year before: "It is very trying to have all these good men killed."<sup>38</sup> Haig, visiting the Somme battle field on 31 March 1917, wrote in his diary:

To many [the attack] meant certain death and all must have known that before they started ... I have not the time to put down all the thoughts which run into my mind when I think of all those fine fellows who either have given their lives for their country or have been maimed in its service.[39]

Yet sentimentality was discouraged and casualties were reckoned as factors in the military balance, not as human tragedies. The British commanders were, in this as in other matters, typical of the military of their time. Nevertheless the question persists as to whether the generals were careless as distinct from lacking in judgement or even merely unfortunate in being given such a strategically unpromising problem to solve. Well after the Second World War a British general wrote:

The validity of the criticism of reckless or unnecessary expenditure of lives ... depends upon the degree of casualties ... which is to be regarded as reasonable. Is it a human factor or is it solely to be related to the practical consideration of maintaining a potential for future operations?[40]

38. Harington, Plumer of Mesines, p.72.

39. Blake, The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, p.215.

40. Carver, El Alamein, p.199.

## Chapter 9 - Summary and conclusions

British governments throughout the war had, among many such, two major preoccupations: manpower and civilian morale. There was a connection between them, with casualties being one of several links.

It became evident after the first German onslaught in 1914 that Britain would be obliged to play not only its traditional role as financier of its European allies, but also to provide and equip an army of continental proportions. The two together would strain the Empire's resources in both money and men. The war had to be paid for by drawing on financial reserves and by normal trade with the outside world - hence at least one of the meanings behind the 1914 slogan of 'Business as usual'. But the expansion of the armaments industry after May 1915 and the general cost of the war created doubt, however, as to whether this could be done. R. McKenna, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and W. Runciman, President of the Board of Trade, argued that financial projections showed that it could not.

Questions as to the adequacy of the total manpower resource took longer to rise to the surface. Up to 1917 it was as much a matter of how recruitment for the Armed Services and industry was organised, since conscription in both cases posed delicate issues, as of there being sufficient men to recruit. Although casualties increased year by year it was not until the end of 1917 - after 3rd Ypres - that they were perceived as a limitation on military operations. The 'Westerners' had continually claimed that there would be enough men if only the government would change its policy of keeping large forces at Salonika and in Mesopotamia. The difficulty of evolving a coherent military and industrial manpower plan had been vastly compounded by the indiscriminate acceptance of men for service with the colours in the early months of the war: "By the time military conscription became law, it was virtually too late

for the imposition of a comprehensive and statistically balanced manpower policy."<sup>1</sup> There were further harmful repercussions when men who had been told they were to remain in essential war work at home were declared inessential and drafted into the army; and when the army was pressed to release men whose skills were judged better deployed at home in industry than in uniform.

However, numbers began to count increasingly from 1917 onwards. Of the three engines of war which saw their appearance as such in 1914-18 - the submarine, the tank and the aircraft - the first had the most deleterious effect on the British at war. An immediate result of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 was to stimulate a need for labour in the shipbuilding industry and in agriculture; such demand came on top of calls for increased numbers of tanks, aeroplanes (including aeroengines) and artillery, all of which were produced by domestic industries. The supply of manpower, even with the increasing employment of women, was unable to keep pace, and this led directly to the denial to the army of the men it said it required at the beginning of 1918. Furthermore, casualties could only have been permitted if the end were in sight, meaning that no more replacements would be needed. This was not seen to be the case early in 1918.

By this late stage, then, it was manpower rather than casualties alone which caused the government concern. This had not always been the case. At first losses had been heavy among men from the social circles in which ministers and generals moved, since it was from this class that officers at that juncture were almost wholly recruited. As more officers were promoted, necessarily, from the ranks, the discontent in influential drawing rooms, with the accompanying danger of political dissent, would become less intense, as Lord Esher hinted in his diary as early as 27 August 1914. There was,

1. Adams and Poirier, The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain 1900-18, p.252.
2. Esher, op.cit., p.180.



nevertheless, fear about those at the other end of the social scale - the urban proletariat: they were known to be poorly housed, fed and educated and the first decade of the century had seen much industrial unrest. Would they consent to be drafted, given the likely fate of many of their number? In the event the apprehension of the authorities proved unfounded and, in time, diminished. The ethos of duty to King and Country proved common to all, was maintained, and throughout the nation there was no notable resistance to service in the army nor, once in the army, to going into action. Casualties - one and a half million men killed or seriously wounded - in more than four years of war, spread around the country amongst ten million households, were too diffused over time and space to have a concentrated impact on public opinion. The censored press was not universally read, there was no radio and above all, no television. Returning soldiers - those who had experienced action - were poor communicators and the nation became hardened to the presence of military hospitals and the walking wounded.

"The huge scale of the casualties made curiously little impact on national morale during the war itself" writes a modern historian.<sup>3</sup> Yet the number is not huge when placed alongside the total of the population from which the civilians in uniform were recruited over the period of the war; neither is it curious if it is recalled that in an era of pronounced patriotic nationalism, a readiness to suffer losses was regarded both as a measure of national resolve and of Britain's fitness to survive as a Great Power.<sup>4</sup> It is, in fact, curious only for those with the disadvantage of hindsight.

That the public had seemingly learned to tolerate casualties was presumably a factor in Lloyd George's reluctant assent to Haig's offensive in Flanders. From the

3. Bourne, op.cit., p.205.

4. Paret, Makers of Modern Strategy, pp.522, 525.

beginning of the conflict he had been alive to the political dimension of a possible decline in the nation's morale as a result of casualties. Up to the last months of 1917, however, there was no pressure exerted in the House of Commons on the government to reduce casualties. They were not the subject of speeches at contested bye-elections and neither, of course, was there adverse comment in the press.

There was, nevertheless, evidence in 1917, (the year when German submarines did most harm), of war-weariness; and the most effective way of preventing any slackening in the will to win would be to present the country with a papable victory for British arms in the field. In practice, unfortunately for this purpose, the British army was counted as an integral factor in the strategies of its senior partner on land: it was, up to mid-1917, tied to the French. This gave the British commanders little strategic room for manoeuvre, whereas their opponents could at least retreat to shorten their line, which they did in early 1917 and again in late 1918. Attacking a continuous line of defence as they were obliged to do, therefore, gave the British only reduced opportunities for a victory as this would have been understood at home. To win such a success they would have had to break through the German defences completely, with a subsequent envelopment of enemy forces on one or other flank.

Haig's dispositions demonstrated that this is what he was aiming for and he has been criticised for not understanding that in the conditions at the time such an outcome was impossible. He should have realised, it is remarked, that he was conducting siege warfare and have armed himself accordingly.<sup>5</sup> A series of attacks with limited objectives - the tactics of "bite and hold" - would not, however, have constituted a major victory, which Haig as well as Lloyd George greatly desired, and would have proved equally as costly in casualties. Plumer's action at Messines, on which

5. Bidwell and Graham, Firepower, p.94.

Haig said he would model his Flanders offensive, was not bought at heavy overall cost in casualties but the proportion of killed to wounded was high. The British army was not tactically innovative - the tank was mechanically before its time - but until the strategic situation changed - with, for example, an erosion of the enemy's reserves - neither side was capable of gaining a victory as victories had been known in previous wars.

The position in reality was that along the fronts in France and Flanders there were only short stretches where large-scale and therefore strategically effective attack was viable. If it had good and undamaged communications behind it, an army on the defence with reserves in hand would always be able to seal off, eventually, a breakthrough by an attacker whose logistic situation would become daily less capable of thrust. In late 1916 GHQ had stressed German losses on the Somme; the enemy must have been further weakened by Nivelle's (admittedly abortive) offensive in the Spring of 1917, and its accompanying expensive British action at Arras; there had been German defeats at Vimy and Messines. Could there not be a chance, therefore, that the German army in the West was in fact weak in reserves?

In the circumstances obtaining in the late summer of 1917 there must have seemed a reasonable hope that it would be possible to amputate the northern end of the German line. This would have been a British victory indeed, on the acknowledgedly British sector of the front. Given the somewhat dire grand strategic situation at that date and the depressing situation at home, Lloyd George, despite his obvious doubts, perhaps understandably consented to an offensive for which the men were available. The casualties were to be accepted, as they had been all along until then. The failure in Flanders to realise the principal objectives of the offensive explains the bitterness thereafter. Yet it may be supposed that success would have been acclaimed, as it was a year later, despite the casualties. Instead, with further

losses, no victory and the expected prolongation of the war into 1919, the manpower shortage, at home as well as in France, dictated a halt to any further offensive action on a large scale. It could only be resumed after the long German offensive from March to July had petered out in patent exhaustion. This wrought a change in the strategic situation and victory through offensive tactics suddenly became possible. Casualties could be risked. In those last attacks of the war, they were more than 100 thousand greater than in the battles of the 3rd Ypres and the names were still appearing in the newspapers after 11 November 1918.

## PART II

The Impact of Social Factors in the Interwar Period  
on the British Army in the Second World War

## Chapter 10 - Education

The historian C. L. Mowat, writing ten years after the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> states that by 1925 in Britain the Great War was receding into the background of the nation's consciousness. There were sufficient reasons for this to be so, apart from the normal human phenomenon of fading memories: there was, at that date, no likelihood of another war while, with the end of the post-war economic surge of activity and the recognition that victory had by no means assured improved standards of living for the majority of citizens, there was considerable preoccupation with prospects in the immediate future. There is, however, no evidence that loss of life in the Great War was generally held to be a cause of the predicament in which the country found itself in the first decade after 1918. After that, perhaps, the volume of war literature which began to appear in the 1920s may have given some substance to the theme of the 'Lost Generation', whilst in the mid-1930s, when there was a growing possibility of another war, the casualties of the previous conflict were adduced by Liddell Hart and others as one of various reasons for non-involvement. Certainly, at a personal level, the Great War was by very many not forgotten, but the depth of memory would have been uneven across society.

It is, in fact possible to discern important streams in the nation's life, the sources of which pre-date the war and which were, in its aftermath, apparently unaffected by it. The flow of material progress broadened considerably, in the development of housing estates and in what we now call 'consumerism' generally, and it embraced not only the middle classes but those with incomes at the lower end of the scale. The indicators here are the increases in the number of vehicles of all types on the roads; radio licences; telephones and newspaper readership; betting in one form or another; places of public entertainment; household

1. Mowat, Britain Between the Wars, p.203.

appliances; hire purchase debt and house mortgages; and better food, shorter working hours, greater life expectancy, and a lower infant mortality rate.

Alongside this growing volume of goods and services coming onto the market, produced by private investment in light engineering plant and retailing, there were two other significant changes on the socio-economic scene. One was the decline, marked by recurrent crises, of the old smokestack industries. The second was the absorption by government of more of the nation's financial resources than hitherto, through taxation and the rates. These monies were then redistributed, through a greatly enlarged state bureaucracy, in the name of what we now call the welfare state. Before the Great War, two and a half million workers were covered by unemployment insurance; by 1920 the number was twelve million. In 1938 there were three civil servants for every two there had been in 1929. Yet the inter-war years witnessed nothing approaching the scale of change after the Second World War. Public education is an example.

The extension of the franchise in the last century, with its implications for political stability and the education of the electorate, caused some debate amongst politicians, Sir William Harcourt and Robert Lowe, both Gladstonian ministers, prominent among them, respecting the state of public education in Britain. The rapid industrial progress of Germany added force to this process, especially because the German model of state education was much esteemed in intellectual circles and there was believed to be a link between the two. Debate began to focus upon secondary education (as distinct from elementary education, already compulsory and free), and in 1894 a committee was set up under Lord Bryce to study the matter and report as to what measures were needed in Britain to improve the situation. The result was the Act of 1896 which attempted to extend secondary education by a combination of voluntary and state initiatives. For administrative reasons and local political

conflicts, which often involved the churches, the Act failed in its purpose. Indifferent performance in the Boer War ("Britain's defeats were humiliating and her victories unexhilarating.")<sup>2</sup> pointed to the need for further legislation. This was given expression in the Act of 1902 which in effect recognised that the state (in the form of Local Education Authorities) must play the major role in the expansion of secondary education which, however, was not to be made available to all, certainly not freely available.

The Act was effective in that it produced rapid growth in secondary education: in 1903/4 there were 482 secondary schools with 86 thousand pupils; in 1918, there were 1,073 such schools with 242,024 pupils (the increase had continued throughout the war, linked to higher skilled worker wages). The relevance to the present thesis of this period in the story of secondary education is that, in the words of one historian, "... at the close of the inter-war period the pattern set ... under the Education Act of 1902 remained unimpaired."<sup>3</sup> The pattern was that elementary and secondary schools should care for the education of two distinct groups of children, with only a minor percentage (9.5% in 1920, 14.34% in 1938) passing from the lower to the higher. This was deliberate and accorded with the view that divisions in the system of education should correspond to the divisions in society itself. As the senior civil servant at the Board of Education (Sir Robert Morant) expressed it in his Department's Report for 1908/9: "The idea that elementary and secondary schools represent not successive stages of education but alternative kinds of education meant for different social classes is deeply rooted ..."<sup>4</sup> The War, although it did nothing to alter the relationship between

2. Kazamias, Politics, Society and Secondary Education in England, p.112.
3. Simon, The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-40, p.290.
4. Lawson & Silver, A Social History of Education in England, p.386.



elementary and secondary education, did stimulate the demand for secondary school places and intensified the debate on the subject at the heart of Morant's words as quoted above. Thus: "The important feature of education in the 1920s and 1930s was ... the attempt to bring elementary and secondary education into an organic relationship."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the Fisher Act of 1918 ("... the single forward-looking social measure of the war years"<sup>6</sup>) raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14 (this was implemented in 1922) and ruled out the habit of sending children to school only half-time up to that age. It also provided for part-time further education to the age of 16, with encouragement to L.E.A.s to take this to 18. The Act of 1936 raised the school leaving age to 15, to take effect in September 1939, but the advent of the Second World War postponed implementation. The average number of pupils on the Public Elementary Schools register in 1920/21 was 5,933,458 (with 5,215,742 in attendance), with about 18.5% in some form of education after the age of 14. In 1937/8 there were 5,087,485 on the register (with 4,526,701 attending), and nearly 20% in full-time education after the age of 14. The smaller number who provided the conscripts for 1939-45 had been, then, taught for longer than their equivalents in the Great War and their health was better. (70% of those medically examined for service with the Forces 1939/45 were pronounced fully fit, as against 36% in the last year of the Great War.) The content of elementary education had, on the other hand, undergone little change and likewise the qualifications of the teachers: the emphasis was on the reading, writing and simple maths, and the teachers did not have university degrees. (The report on the present writer for the Easter term, 1935 from St John the Baptist, Leicester gave only three subjects - Arithmetic, English and Reading -

5. Kazamias, op.cit., p.144.

6. Simon, op.cit., p.18.

and the headmaster's name, with no mention of his qualifications. The number in the class was 45; it had been 51 a year earlier.)

At the other end of the educational scale, the number attending universities increased from 20 thousand in 1900 to 50 thousand in 1938, but between the wars, after the immediate post-1918 bulge, (the government gave special grants to ex-servicemen), numbers increased only slightly, being almost static in the 1930s. The expansion took place mainly outside Oxford and Cambridge, which had traditional links to the Army and later, the RAF, but it was nevertheless at the former university that the much-quoted debate occurred in February 1933, in the Union, on whether members would fight for King and Country in a future war. They resolved that they would not, but in practice, when the time came, they did so, if for different symbols.<sup>7</sup> In company with the world about them, as the 1930s progressed, politically-minded students saw affairs in terms of fascism against the left and centre, much influenced by the Spanish Civil War; and also, perhaps, by the circumstance that many of the prominent figures who had cause to flee mainland Europe were intellectuals, given sanctuary in British universities. Expansion of the universities had brought with it an alteration in the complexion of the student population: within the overall total, the numbers coming from the maintained secondary schools had increased. They were mostly males and it was they (like Dan Billany, author of a novel about the war, written in a POW camp<sup>8</sup>) along with those who had attended secondary school with them but had not gone on to university, who provided the bulk of the junior officers in the Second World War.

It was indeed the increase in the number of secondary schools which constituted the most notable feature of public

7. Taylor, English History 1914-45, p.362.

8. D. Billany, The Trap, written in 1944; first published 1950.

education between the wars. In 1914 1,027 such schools appeared on the grant list; in 1938 the number was 1,398. The number of pupils went from 187,647 to 470,003, with free places increasing from 63,274 to 215,125. The totals were small in relation to the elementary school population, giving rise to the view that

... publicly maintained secondary schools had been established, suitably geared to fill clerical and minor administrative posts [which increased from 2,400 thousand in 1911 to 3,400 thousand in 1931], with a small and carefully controlled outlet to the university.[9]

This latter stream was provided mainly by the grammar schools, regarded by the Hadow Report (1926)<sup>10</sup> as providing the elite of public secondary education; dilution of these schools by the addition of Technical High Schools (Spens Report 1938<sup>10</sup>) could have led to something approaching a multilateral (today called comprehensive) school and was thus to be avoided. In other words: "The secondary school continued to be regarded as essentially a middle class school."<sup>11</sup> The children usually left at age sixteen, after taking the School Certificate examination, which Spens maintained had improved educational standards. They then went, quite often, into commerce - into insurance offices, the joint stock banks and the like. Thus, in Antony Powell's novel of wartime, The Valley of Bones, we find a battalion whose officers had, mostly, worked in banks.

Among the teaching staff of the expanded secondary school system were ex-soldiers from the Great War. If the experience of the present writer were typical - and mixing with boys from other schools showed that it was - masters who had served in the war showed no military bias in their teaching. The war was in fact hardly mentioned, either in school or out; and the history books stopped well short of 1914.

9. Simon, op.cit., p.279.

10. Reports of the Consultative Committee for the Board of Education, HMSO, 1926 and 1938.

11. Curtis, Education in Britain since 1900, p.107.

The fathers of secondary school children would quite often have been officers in the Great War, but they would not have attended one of the public schools which predominantly furnished the pre-1914 Army with its officers: they would have been promoted from the ranks. The career of the hero in Manning's novel<sup>12</sup> was not exceptional. That it became commonplace to award commissions in this manner, especially from late 1915 onwards, is understandable given the expansion of the Army 1914 to 1918 and the casualty rate amongst sub-alterns. The number of boys leaving the public schools annually did not answer the demand for officers: in 1914, for example, the War Office had on its lists just 2 thousand 'young gentlemen', former O.T.C. men and university graduates who it deemed could be offered immediate commissions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, of those who eventually served, a higher proportion than the average for officers was killed - 1 in 5. Just over 37 thousand British officers lost their lives in the first war (some 10 thousand fewer than those killed in Bomber Command operations in the second war).

Nevertheless there were sufficient public school men amongst the officers to help build in some circles a lasting belief in the 'Lost Generation' lore and for writers after 1918 frequently to draw the officers in their war novels and plays from that class - e.g. R. C. Sherriff in Journey's End, first staged in 1929. (On the eve of the Somme the G.O.C. Fourth Army, Rawlinson, could hold a dinner solely for Old Etonians, to hearten those from his alma mater who were to take part in the "big push".) There was in some minds an association between the public school ethos and a willingness, even eagerness, to die young for one's country (and die gloriously - death in youth being a more tragically exalted affair than death in old age). Critics of the public schools believed that study of the Classics, to which much emphasis was given, engendered a romanticism about war;

12. F. Manning (Private 19022), Her Privates We, 1930.

13. Parker, The Old Lie, p.34.

Richard Aldington believed that the schools inculcated a war-like spirit in the boys<sup>14</sup> while Bertrand Russell railed against the "... whole foul literature of 'glory' ... with which the minds of children are polluted".<sup>15</sup>

To some extent the public schools changed between the wars: "The school of 1930 differed intellectually ... in that in general a more liberal and tolerant attitude towards things of the mind existed than had previously been the case." In addition "... the ogre of athleticism ... was at least partially tamed."<sup>16</sup> However, the same historian of the public schools continued: "... though there was change, especially in a liberal direction, it tended to be effective only in spots and in general was more in the external arrangements than in the spirit of a public school, in the regulations than in the minds and hearts of boys." Thus, he continues, the public schools "still suffered grievously from ... snobbishness to outsiders"<sup>17</sup> and quotes W. H. Auden: "... the public school boy's attitude to the working class ... has altered little since the war."<sup>18</sup>

In sum, therefore, education had done little between 1918 and 1939 to reorientate or better inform the young in Britain, across the classes and over the age groups, with the exception of those who benefited from the expansion of the public secondary schools. The effects of enhanced material prosperity aside, the minds of the generation of 1939 were seemingly not greatly different from that of 1914. If the attitude to war and therefore to the acceptance of casualties altered, the change would have been wrought by what the generations between the wars absorbed out of school, from

14. Mack, Public Schools and British Opinion since 1860, p.410.

15. Parker, op.cit., p.140.

16. Mack, op.cit., p.366.

17. Ibid., pp.368/9.

18. Ibid., p.447.

society around them. The churches had insignificant influence: the Census of 1902/3 showed from its figures that "the working classes in the big towns were almost entirely indifferent" to denominational religion.<sup>19</sup> This secular outlook on life, characteristic of the mass of the population, remained unchanged and increasingly embraced the middle classes where, the historian of religion tells us, "A 'nominal' Catholicism was growing up ... similar to that 'nominal C.of E.-ism' which means very little except at baptism, marriages and funerals, happenings which tend more and more to become 'social events'."<sup>20</sup> During the 1930s "the Christian community as a whole was bewildered and leaderless", and both the Church of England and the Nonconformist ministries became short of clergy. In parallel, the former lost its grip on the elementary schools so that, it is reported, when evacuation from the cities to the countryside took place at the beginning of the Second World War, "many of the children ... had no idea who was born on Christmas Day."<sup>21</sup>

19. Spinks, Religion in Britain since 1900, p.16.

20. Ibid., p.82.

21. Ibid., p.216.

## Chapter 11 - The BBC, Poppy Day, and the Press

The historian of the Church of England went on to remind his readers, however, that when recording the decline in church attendance, note should at the same time be made of church services broadcast over the radio. In fact religious services were broadcast on Sundays from 1924 onwards, with daily services introduced four years later. As the historian of the BBC points out, however, whilst "For the most part it [the BBC] reflected the society and culture in which it developed ...", there were times when it consciously stood out against a social tendency, and he cites time given to religion as an example.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of broadcasting by wireless was notable indeed: it began, effectively, in 1922 (evenings only) when it was estimated there would be a demand for 200,000 licences. By 1923, 595,496 licences had been issued and on 1st January 1939 the number had increased to 9,082,666. By the latter date the BBC was broadcasting nearly 97 hours a week and "In the towns and great cities broadcasting was accepted casually and easily as an unobtrusive element in daily life."<sup>2</sup> In 1921 publicity regarding the Census of that year was given in the Press; ten years later the BBC was also used since, as was later reported, "the development of wireless communication made possible in 1931 the dissemination of information on this subject." Because the BBC beheld itself as offering a public service, not catering to a market, it at first carried out no market research. When it eventually interviewed its listeners in 1937, through a Programme Questionnaire, there was no mention of a demand for programmes with war themes.

1. Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the U.K., Vol.II, p.7.
2. Ibid., p.255.

Notwithstanding its sustained refusal to provide for the wishes of 'tap listeners'<sup>3</sup> the BBC was nevertheless responsive in some degree to the preferences of its audience, witness the introduction of a 'revue and vaudeville' section in 1930. However, talks (religion and talks were grouped under Education until 1924, after which they were given separate identities) were allotted between 8 to 10% of air time, as programme analyses throughout the period demonstrate. These were frequently on serious subjects, such as those on unemployment by Beveridge in 1931 and 'The Causes of War' and the 'Wither Britain' series, both in 1934; plays with a war theme were also broadcast but the historian of the BBC nowhere mentions that the Great War with its casualties was given particular emphasis in the broadcasts of these years. He quotes, indeed, a comment in the Morning Post of 9th January 1928: "The average man or woman, when at leisure with the world, has not the slightest desire to be plunged into disputes on any of these subjects [politics, religion, industrial relations]."<sup>4</sup> Briggs adds: "The BBC, by the nature of its social context, never found it easy fully to penetrate the working class world which provided it with by far the largest part of its audience."<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with its public service role, the BBC broadcast Remembrance Day Services from the mid-1920s onwards. In the parades up and down the country on that day the British Legionaires were prominent. The Legion was an amalgam of various ex-servicemen's organisations formed in 1921 and they shared a resolve that the soldiers of the Great War should not be cast aside by society in the peace after the fighting, as had always happened previously. The historian of the movement writes that by founding and joining the British Legion "... they won a greater measure of justice for

3. Ibid., p.74.

4. Ibid., p.130.

5. Ibid., p.408.



ex-servicemen than ever before in British history".<sup>6</sup> In comparison with the numbers who had served in the war, their number was small (122,986 in 1922, 526,413 in 1939) but they were active in lobbying Members of Parliament on the two matters which naturally preoccupied them most: pensions and unemployment. They were vociferous in their support of the opposition to Bonar Law's plan to abolish the Ministry of Pensions in 1923, but in general they were politically neutral and concentrated mostly on helping one another and appealing to the financial generosity of the public. "The Legion was happiest in its role as the backer, and often the sponsor, of specific employment schemes."<sup>7</sup>

The Legion's sustained success in raising money by the sale of Flanders Poppies in association with the celebration of Remembrance Day (£106,000 in 1921, £595,887 in 1939) contrasts with its otherwise fading presence from the national scene with the passage of the years. On the tenth anniversary of the Armistice the Legion provided the inspiration behind a large-scale Great Pilgrimage to the battlefields in France and Belgium, but attempted nothing on future anniversaries, noting perhaps that commercial tours of the same areas had dropped away by the mid-1920s. Among the unemployed of late 1922, ex-servicemen numbered about one third; ten years later the percentage would have been much less because the young unemployed would not have served in the war. The Legion's scope for activity was thereby restricted and, as its historian comments, by the mid-1930s "[that] some of the traditional Legion issues ... were moribund can hardly be doubted."<sup>8</sup>

Apart from its parades and appeals on Poppy Day, the British Legion was not an important feature of the inter-war

6. Wootton, The Official History of the British Legion, p.2.

7. Ibid., p.103.

8. Ibid., p.192.

scene. The anniversary itself, nevertheless, was an annual event as noteworthy as any other in the national calendar. As such it was fully reported in the press, ceremonies at the Cenotaph in London (after 1919) and the larger provincial cities in the national press and services elsewhere - including small villages - in the local papers. The crowds in London were reported as hardly diminishing throughout the period, with the pilgrims, as they were called, assembling to file pass the Cenotaph in Whitehall just after dawn and continuing until evening. The King always attended the service, except when he was out of the country (1921) or prevented from doing so by ill-health or threatening weather (1931, 1933, 1935). After the burial of the Unknown Warrior in 1920, a special service was held in Westminster Abbey (sometimes attended by the King if he had not been at the Cenotaph) and in 1929 the practice began of holding a festival in the Albert Hall to honour the 'Glorious Dead' (as they were usually referred to) and the Armed Services, in the presence of the Sovereign.

The 11th of November was deemed to merit the first leader in The Times in all but three of the inter-war years (its Armistice Day issue was called a 'Royal Edition'). In writing of somewhat varied quality the changes of national mood were noted: in 1922 it questioned whether "the great silence means to us what it first meant"; in 1926 it reported a "subtle change of sentiment [which] ... suggests the gradual evolution of a more reasoned and slightly less emotional reverence"; in 1930 the writer gave it as his opinion that there was "no sign yet that the people is losing its love for its dead" and the following year the leader thought that there was no return to an initial tendency to turn a day of remembrance and hope into a day of mourning; in 1937 (when there was also a leader on the unveiling of the statue to Field Marshal Haig) the writer refutes the idea, put forward by some, that continuance of the Armistice Day observance had become irrelevant to the modern generation or that it fostered a military spirit. The year after, with

Europe on the verge of war again, in the second leader, The Times states that "Commemoration must remain, then, the first purpose of Armistice Day." In 1939 there was no service at the Cenotaph, no national two minutes silence; and in 1940 no leading article on the occasion at all.

The Times in 1939 had a circulation of just over 204 thousand; the Daily Express claimed 2,329 thousand. There were, at that time, 52 morning papers, 85 evening papers and 18 Sunday papers (including the News of the World with the biggest circulation, at well over 4 million, of them all). The daily circulation of quality papers was over 8.25 million; of all dailies, nearly 12 million; of the Sunday papers, 15.7 million. If a multiple of two is applied, more than half the population of Great Britain (46.6 million in 1939) read a newspaper and many of them a quality paper.

The historian of the Press in the later 1930s writes: "The common experience of all journalists and editors of the period was the Great War. The carnage and disillusion of the war to end wars worked upon the journalists as much as it did on the poets and politicians."<sup>9</sup> Yet comment in the quality press on the threatening situation in 1938 did not make manifest anti-war sentiments, nor invoke memories of the previous conflict. There was disagreement as to the course which should be taken to dissuade Nazi Germany from aggression (but also a large measure of agreement, particularly on rearmament), with the Labour Daily Herald advocating joint action with Russia, the Liberal News Chronicle stressing the need for Britain, France and Russia to take a positive stance and the Manchester Guardian on 16th September writing "When one thinks of the intolerable price of war in lives and misery it would be dirt cheap to pay the cost of transplanting the Sudetens into Germany ...". This was on the same level of analysis as the Daily Express's slogan of that year: "There will be no War."

9. Gannon, The British Press & Germany 1936-39, p.5.

## Chapter 12 - Poetry and prose

If it is difficult to estimate the influence of the Press in the formation of public opinion, it can be more certainly assumed that journalists would normally only publish comment and opinion which would find an echo somewhere amongst its readership. It is, then, significant that whilst by 1938 there was still reluctance to think in terms of war, widespread support for outright pacifism, to judge from the daily press, was lacking. The result of the League of Nations 'Peace Ballot' in 1934/5 bore this out: the 11½ million who answered favoured collective security but this included military action. Canon Dick Sheppard's Peace Pledge Union which was launched in 1934 (a signatory renounced war forever), collected 80 thousand supporters in the first year; but the number had reached only 133 thousand by 1937.<sup>1</sup> If there were few pacifists, however, there did still exist a fairly widespread propensity to blame international tensions on the armaments manufacturers, who were suspected of encouraging belligerence. A Royal Commission was set up in 1935 to examine the world traffic in arms and volumes were written on the subject in Gollancz's Left Book Club series (1936) and thereafter.

Against this background the influence of the Great War poets must be assessed. As with the familiar representation of the War leaving a scar across the face of the nation, the effect of trench fighting on those poets who took part in it, and their expression of it, has also passed into folklore. Hence poets as a category easily find their way into quotations, such as that given at the beginning of the last paragraph of the preceding chapter. In that case, the allusion to the carnage and disillusion familiarly associated with the war and its poets is used to bracket them with journalists and politicians, with whom their poetry shows no affinity.

1. Page, The Thirties in Britain, p.65.

On one count over 2,200 individuals<sup>2</sup> - a small majority being women - had poems published in the Great War. It was a time when volumes of poetry were purchased on a notable scale: Brooke's poems went through twentyfive impressions in the War; Houseman's A Shropshire Lad sold sixteen thousand copies in 1918. The bulk of this considerable output, which declined somewhat after 1915, was not at all anti-war and, understandably, its quality was such that it is now forgotten. Even so, the remainder is sufficient to fill at least four anthologies and to find places in books of both general and war poetry - given, of course, that there are many repetitions. Many of the poets did not serve in the Army in France, although they wrote well enough to convey the contrary impression: Wilfred Gibson's "Breakfast", with its lines on Tommy being shot dead, is an example. Some were writing before the war (e.g. Binyon), and others, who did serve, (e.g. Gurney and Blunden), wrote much of their work after the war. They shared a desire to publish. Denis Healy noted this when comparing the poetry of the two wars:

Most of the poets we know of in the first world war were writing in the hope of publication. They were nearly all men - and men with university degrees, largely from the public schools.[3]

What has been referred to above as the public school ethos, with its glorification of a soldier's death for King, School and Country and Henry Newbolt as its exemplar, can readily be detected in several of the earlier poems but over the span of years which saw the writing of war poetry (a convenient rather than accurate description, as Blunden pointed out), there was a great variety of themes. Indeed, two of the anthologies published in the 1960s divide their choice of poems under theme headings.<sup>4</sup>

2. Reilly, English Poetry in the First World War.

3. The Times, 23 July 1990.

4. Gardner, Up the Line to Death; Parsons, Men Who March Away.

Given such a wealth of writing it is not surprising that recent commentators conclude: "It is not really possible to make the war's poetry follow a single inclusive argument."<sup>5</sup> Moods changed during the war itself, with Sassoon's well-tracked progress from enthusiasm through disillusion and bitterness to resignation, (he wrote no anti-war poetry after the German March 1918 offensive), and Wells's turning to religious faith (and back again after the war) as examples from poetry and prose. Poetic descriptions of the brutal and the grisly were common (e.g. Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump", Graves' "A Dead Boche"), although we are reminded that poets "create as well as perceive".<sup>6</sup> (The exercise of poetic imagination could lead to the charge that the poet was writing for the market: Surely evidently thought Brooke was doing so and the latter himself wrote: "I did the fresh, boyish stunt and it was a great success.")<sup>7</sup> This compares with one historian's comment on the Great War novelists: In 1929, when the war book boom was getting underway ... self-pity among the survivors had become a respectable and financially profitable attitude ..."<sup>8</sup>) There was, however, something approaching reverence for the comradeship (not the same as friendship) which living and fighting together in the trenches engendered amongst men and officers and which was enhanced by their attitude to civilians at home and soldiers at base establishments. Owen's "Insensibility" brings to mind Baldwin's description of the post-war House of Commons as composed of "hard-faced men who had done well out of the war" as, very vividly, does Golding's "In the Gallery where the Fat Men go." Hibberd cites Gurney's letters home, which gloss over the horrors experienced in the trenches, as an example of the feeling of isolation of the front-line

5. Hibberd & Onions, Poetry of the Great War, p.4.

6. Ibid., p2.

7. Parker, The Old Lie, p.154.

8. A. Wohl, The Generation of 1914, p.120.

soldier,<sup>9</sup> a phenomenon already noted in Part I and stressed by Fussell.<sup>10</sup>

There was, however, one theme which at least touched on, was of the same kind or texture as several of the others, and that was 'the Pity of War'.<sup>11</sup> It linked the many poems whose central strand was, variously, religion, nature, pain, suffering, death and renewal; and contemplation of its sadness began to admit doubts as to whether the war was justified, which led in turn to accusations of futility. Owen's poem of that title did not in fact arraign the futility of war as such; there is no evidence that Gurney thought the war futile; Sassoon returned to the front to fight after publication of his accusatory letter of defiance on 31 July 1917 (although Taylor omits to point this out<sup>12</sup>); and the historians of the poetry of the war state that not all soldier poets believed "the war was futile, could be ended by negotiation, that military victory was wrong, that soldierly virtues were worthless."<sup>13</sup> Hibberd indeed concludes:

The many hundreds of poems written by soldiers in the later stages of the war often express resentment at civilian attitudes and hatred of war but they rarely call for peace without victory and almost never envisage defeat.[14]

Yet, the myth has it, the poets thought the war futile. In 1930 Douglas Jerrold recognised the strength of the hold that the myth was taking and in a pamphlet entitled "The Lie about the War" warned that if it were accepted it would "create in the minds of the public a love of peace foolishly based on a barren fear of useless suffering." He could not believe that

9. Hibberd, The First World War, p.99.

10. Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, p.88.

11. The phrase is taken from Wilfred Owen's poem, 'Strange Meeting'.

12. Taylor, English History 1914-45, p.61.

13. Hibberd & Onions, op.cit., p.2;8.

14. Hibberd, op.cit., p.174.

Christians would accept that "principles which they have come to hold for conscience sake are to be abandoned for safety's sake."<sup>15</sup>

Jerrold did not destroy the myth. It was cultivated in (and limited to) certain circles in society in the thirties but otherwise appeared only strongly after the Second World War. The judgement of the historian of the country at this period is that "In the years after the war they [Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg] were hardly noticed outside a small circle of intellectual and dedicated pacifists."<sup>16</sup> Nor in the more widely-read novels dealing with the war was there any greater sense of futility than in reality there was in the poetry.

Although the works of Ford and Mottram had appeared earlier, the most popular and best known novels in English were published around the same year as the German All Quiet on the Western Front (1929) - in the end the biggest seller of them all. Two of them - Manning's Her Privates We (written under a pseudonym) and Sassoon's Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, both of 1930 - dealt throughout their length with a soldier's life in the war. Both have descriptions of the often gory conditions of existence in the trenches and of trench warfare. Sassoon writes of the "mangled effigies of the dead", Manning of "men smashed, obliterated in sudden eruptions of earth, rent and strewn by bloody fragments." Yet the "... suggestion that the war books dwelt on horror for horror's sake was misleading".<sup>17</sup> T. E. Lawrence said, indeed, that the war in retrospect was more horrible than in actuality: it was sometimes "post war nostalgia shoved into the war period."<sup>18</sup> Manning's Private 19022 writes with an insight gained from personal observation

15. Ibid., p.194.

16. A. Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties, p.241.

17. Ibid., p.242.

18. Wohl, op.cit., p.120.



into the reaction of the Other Ranks to the fighting:

We all know that there must be losses, you can't expect to take a trench without some casualties; but they seem to go from saying that losses are unavoidable, to thinking that they're necessary, and from that, to thinking they don't matter.

This is one of the Tommies speaking and the "they" are staff officers and politicians. Sassoon's Lieutenant Sherston, by contrast, is very much the officer and writes like the author would have written if using the first person. He evinces no bitterness at the death of his Lance Corporal at his side and describes an operation in these terms: "Our casualties had not been heavy (we had lost about one hundred men but only a dozen of them had been killed)." This is similar in tone to Graves in Goodbye to All That (1929) but Sherston does stop at one point to muse - on contemplating a dead blonde-haired German: "Perhaps I had some dim sense of the futility which had put an end to this good-looking youth." Sassoon's novel is in truth an autobiography, to the point that Sherston undergoes an experience in the trenches identical with one of which the author had written in poetic form some twelve years previously.

In general, however, futility is not a central or even a sub-theme of either book; nor is it of Aldington's Death of a Hero, published in 1929. Life in the Army, mostly at the front, takes up only about a third of this novel; the prime character, Winterbourne, first of all served in the ranks and the author was evidently writing from experience - as indeed was the case. There are grisly accounts of trench raids and the men grumble but there is no deep-rooted protest.

Winterbourne

found that the real soldiers, the frontline troops, had no more delusions about the War than he had. They hadn't his feeling of protest and agony over it all, they hadn't tried to think it out. They went on with the business, hating it, because they had been told it had to be done and believed what they had been told.

In the end Winterbourne, by now commissioned, needlessly exposes himself to enemy fire and is killed; but this is not a gesture at the futility of war, rather an act of self-

destruction by a man whose whole life had become intolerably disappointing. The war is only one of a number of backgrounds against which the novelist has his hero act out his life - as is the case with Ford's Tietjens.

A strong sense of disillusion also informs the writing, not in novel form, of Montague, who published earlier in the decade (1922). Indeed, the book carries the title Disenchantment. In this case a range of institutions and persons bring forth pungent comment: the church, the upper class, the rulers (but not the King - "he gave up his beer"), the officers, especially staff officers, politicians, war correspondents - almost the human race itself; pity is reserved for the men with their ill-educated minds and their poor health. The War, evidently, had brought about no improvement in peacetime conditions, hence the disenchantment, but it is nowhere described as having been futile. Lower down the ladder of literary sophistication, qualities popularly associated with the officer class attracted a wide readership: Buchan's Hannay novels, written during the war itself, Sapper's Bulldog Drummond books and Forrester, critical but not anti-war in The General; whilst on the bottom rungs W. E. Johns and Percy F. Westerman (for would-be airman and sailors respectively) lifted the Armed Services high in the estimation of schoolboys.

At the other end of the scale "The accepted 'major authors' of the twenties - T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, William B. Yeats, Pound, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence - had not been involved in the conflict"<sup>19</sup> and were seemingly uninterested. Yeats was of the opinion that war was not a proper subject for a poet to write about and excluded Owen's poems from his Oxford Book on that account. Later, Larkin held a similar view. The new literary magazines of the twenties encouraged new writing and did not look over their shoulders to the war for inspiration. The same was true of

19. Branson, op.cit., p.193.

both novelists and poets of the following decade: Waugh was an "outstanding chronicler of the period's frantic hedonism and moral and spiritual emptiness"<sup>20</sup> whilst Orwell and Priestley were preoccupied with the social and political issues of the day, as was Spender. Rearmament and general recovery from the deflationary early years of the thirties brought some alleviation of slump conditions but the political chasm between right and left deepened.

With the advent of the Spanish Civil War commitment was, in the view of the intellectuals, inescapable, mandatory, almost - and it seems that in Spain, at least, casualties on the battlefield were to be expected and pardoned on account of the cause. The degree to which this conflict stirred the passions particularly of those nourished on the humanities (with the notable exceptions of Eliot and Blunden) and of the politically-inclined intelligentsia is difficult for a more hardened generation to grasp. Yet in the view of two historians, the Spanish Civil War "probably gave rise to greater and more poignant English poetry than the Second World War."<sup>21</sup> Also, it was admitted, to more trash. More importantly, it helped prepare the public for what it would read and hear about Germany and Hitler. The country was receptive. Nazi Germany's support of Franco (particularly the well-publicised operations of the Luftwaffe), coming on top of its persecution of the Jews, especially Jews with university connections, was sufficient in cultured circles to stifle fear of a repeat of the Great War. Bertrand Russell wrote that it was just possible to believe that even the supremacy of the Kaiser would have been better than war - but not that of Hitler.<sup>22</sup>

20. Page, op.cit., p.75.

21. Branson & Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties., p.278.

22. Ibid., p.67.

### Chapter 13 - A changing society

Apprehension about what form a coming war might take was never much below the surface from 1938 onwards and the subject was frequently out in the open for debate and speculation. The possibility - indeed, probability - of attack from the air was of widest concern and an historian of the period writes that several poets wrote of the horrors of bombing in their verse.<sup>1</sup> There was, however, no reference to the air-raids casualties of the Great War. It was perhaps popular confidence in French defences (the Maginot Line was well-reported in the newspapers) which stayed the public mind from dwelling on the fate of a future British Army on the continent, together with the hope that land warfare would have progressed beyond the mass and murderous struggles of 1914-18, as other material things had progressed in the interim. Liddell Hart, however, "motivated ... by his passionate reaction against the futile slaughter of the First World War"<sup>2</sup> preached against sending once again a British army to Europe. He disliked the prospect of such a force coming under French command (in this he was at one with a section of Army opinion, including the future CIGS), believed it would as before be committed to the offence and as a result suffer heavily in casualties, the possession of tanks notwithstanding. Liddell Hart's view that in modern warfare the attacker would be unable to overcome the defence led him to believe that the Germans would be unlikely to assume the offensive.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, as will be seen in Pt.III, the British Army had no intention of passing from the defensive to the offensive in the early stages of the war. It was not wedded to the

1. Branson & Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, p.121.
2. Bond, Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought, p.57.
3. Mearsheimer, Liddell Hart & the Weight of History, p.124.

"attack at any cost" doctrine said to characterise its actions in the Great War<sup>4</sup> and it was in any case not equipped to do so. Priority had not been given to the army in the rearmament programmes of the mid-1930s: in particular, weaponry research was inadequate, so that in the main the weapons used in France up to May 1940 were those of the Great War. The infantry had the Short Lee Enfield .303 rifle and Lewis and Vickers machine guns; the artillery had the old 18 and 60 pounders, with some of the earliest versions of the new 25 pounder, along with re-tubed 18 pounders and the old 6-inch howitzers. The Army had no self-propelled guns, no very heavy guns and an anti-tank gun (2 pdr) which was too light to be effective - although the design reflected mistaken thinking about tank warfare as much as paucity of resources. Nevertheless, in the opinion of modern military historians, the British army in France in 1939/40 possessed an "armoury ... as good as anything possessed by either their future enemy or their allies".<sup>5</sup> The weaknesses lay in the armour and in the ability to handle armour, especially in combination with the other two arms, the artillery and the infantry; in the low quality of army/air co-operation; and in training generally. Yet the revelation of these deficiencies lay in the future: before its defeat in France in 1940 it was not said of the British Army that it had need to fear its opponents.

As the country stood at the verge of a second conflict there was concern at what the cost might be, in economic, financial and human terms; and since the whole people would be involved, whether they would bear it. The morale of the nation was as important as that of the Services which would do the fighting. As Michael Howard has observed: "The steadily improved standards of living tend to increase the instinct of self-preservation and to diminish the spirit of

4. Bond, op.cit., p.98.

5. Bidwell & Graham, op.cit., p.184.

self-sacrifice ..."<sup>6</sup> Britain was better off materially in 1939 than in 1914. Real wages were higher in many sectors, although the ownership of capital had broadened only slightly; there was no religious revival or apparent change in spiritual values; suffrage was universal, though "it was the habit among married women to refer all political questions to their husbands"<sup>7</sup>; on the political scene itself, the fade-out of the Liberals seemed at least as momentous as the hesitant arrival of Labour; many of the middle class were more educated and, outwardly at least, less deferential but class attitudes strongly remained, testing that national unity which the Jubilee and Coronation had made apparent. Aldington's Great War hero George Winterbourne witnessed the arrival of younger generations in France and recognised that they did not care as he had cared. Sassoon's Lieutenant Sherston admitted that "...even in the minds of old soldiers the harsh horror mellows and recedes."<sup>8</sup>

By 1939, the Great War was not alive in the minds and feelings of the new generations; there was only ceremonial.

6. Paret, op.cit., p.519.

7. Branson & Heinemann, op.cit., p.319.

8. Ibid., p.325.

### PART III

The relevance of Great War casualties to the  
conduct of the Second World War.

## Chapter 14 - Churchill, Casualties and Allied Strategy

However firm its eventual resolve, there is strong evidence of the Chamberlain government's reluctance to commit the country to the war which eventually began in 1939. Other considerations apart, ministers believed war to be a dangerous diversion of resources, of which manpower was one - and one with whose allocation problems the Prime Minister himself had personal wartime acquaintance. Not that he expected a future war to repeat in the same form its demands on manpower, for as he wrote to his sisters in 1936:

I cannot believe that the next war ... will be like the last one and I believe our resources will be more profitably employed in the air and on the sea than in building up great armies.[1]

Nevertheless his government took the decision in due course to bring into being an army of 55 divisions; so that, weapons having become, if anything, more destructive, casualties to some extent in line with previous experience must have been expected. The question therefore is, did such expectation influence the government's assessment of what its military strategy should be? Did it, for example, shrink from a course of action which would ineluctably involve long casualty lists?

The first strategic decision - obvious at the time but which did not, for Britain, undergo any change throughout the war despite radically shifting strategic circumstances - was that the prime objective should be the defeat of Germany. Although the Chiefs of Staff had frequently pointed to the unfolding risk of conflict on a wider scale, with Italy and Japan ranged against Britain<sup>2</sup>, in 1939 military minds were concentrated upon Germany; and the strategy was to reduce Germany by blockade, by - eventually - air attack, and by land forces once a sufficient army had been built up. This

1. O.H.G.S., Vol.I, p.447.
2. Ibid., p.256.
3. CAB 66 1 14.



would take at least three years.<sup>3</sup> In April 1940 a C.O.S. paper recognised that whilst the land forces in France were sufficient only to hold up a German invasion, not to launch an attack themselves, nevertheless the army should "shrink from no sacrifices and from no measures, however drastic" to shorten the period of time needful to go over to the offensive.<sup>4</sup> Thus the strategy was defensive on land in its expected first stage because the army was too weak to permit of an alternative and it is therefore unnecessary to agree with J. M. Roberts when he writes that "The 'phoney war' ... had as its fundamental explanation the wish of French and British soldiers to avoid the slaughter of Passchendaele and Verdun."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the strategic objective and the means of achieving it did not change after the defeat in May 1940. In an appreciation written in September of that year the C.O.S. stated:

It is not our policy to attempt to raise, and land on the Continent, an army comparable in size with that of Germany. We should aim, nevertheless, as soon as the action of the blockade and air offensive have secured conditions when numerically inferior forces can be employed with good chance of success, to re-establish a striking force on the Continent with which we can impose our terms ... The general conclusion, therefore, is that our strategy during 1941 must be one of attrition ... the general aim ... should be to pass to the general offensive in all spheres and in all theatres with the utmost possible strength in the Spring of 1942.[6]

In the previous month (August 1940) Churchill, by now Prime Minister, used these words, addressing the House of Commons in a debate on the war situation:

In the last war millions of men fought by hurling enormous masses of steel at one another. 'Men and shells' was the cry and prodigious slaughter was the answer. In this war nothing of this kind has yet appeared. It is a conflict of strategy, of organisation, of technical apparatus, of science, mechanics and morale. The British casualties in the first twelve months of the Great War amounted to 365 thousand. In

4. CAB 66 6 111.

5. Roberts, Europe 1880-1945, p.525.

6. CAB 66 11 362.

this war, I am thankful to say, British killed, wounded, prisoner and missing, including civilians, do not exceed 92 thousand and of these a large proportion are alive as prisoners of war.[7]

Since Churchill, as both Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, was a prime factor in the formulation of overall military strategy (to a greater extent than Lloyd George), advised by the Chiefs of Staff, it is necessary to examine his attitudes to casualties in order to divine what influence, if any, his experience of the Great War had. He had served in it both as a minister of the crown and, briefly, as an army officer. However, in assessing what Churchill wrote on the subject of casualties, it is as well to bear in mind three considerations: first, in both wars he was a serving politician, most of the time in office, addressing himself to different audiences at times of varying vicissitudes in the country's fortunes; second, he was both a principal figure in and historian of the two wars, assuredly with a sharp eye for the record; and third, he was a master of the spoken and written word, with a sensitive appreciation of how phrases sounded and looked, of the emotions they could be relied on to call forth. As President Kennedy expressed it, "he mobilised the English language and sent it into battle."

Probably Churchill's best-known essay on the subject of casualties are the passages in The World Crisis where he attacks military policy in the Great War. R. Prior concludes from this work that he "was not the militarist of popular legend" and that he never lost his humanity.<sup>8</sup> He was, however, at one time a professional soldier and as such served for some months in late 1915 and the first half of 1916 with regiments of the B.E.F. in France, at the front. During this time he wrote to his wife in the same vein as many others might have written home but for the censorship: "A total indifference to death or casualties prevails. What

7. 364 H.C. Deb. 5s.

8. Prior, Churchill's 'World Crisis' as History, p.283.

has to be done is done, and the losses accepted without fuss or comment."<sup>9</sup> Or again: "I have now had about one hundred killed and wounded in this regiment since coming into the line, which is about one in five of those exposed in the trenches...One gets gradually accustomed to casualties ..."<sup>10</sup> As we saw in Part I, in the early stages of the Great War "The social world in which ... Churchill moved had in a few months been shattered by the deaths of so many of its young men"<sup>11</sup> but this did not mean such losses should not be accepted if victory so demanded.<sup>12</sup> As for those outside his circle, his personal doctor observed that "he has never given a thought to what was happening in the soldier's mind, he has not tried to share his fears. If a soldier does not do his duty, the P.M. says that he ought to be shot"<sup>13</sup> - as, of course, some hundreds were in the Great War.

In the Second World War Churchill himself gives many examples of his readiness to order the sacrifice of life: during the retreat to Dunkirk "I now resolved that Calais should be fought to the death".<sup>14</sup> "The effectual blocking of Tripoli harbour would be well worth a battleship upon the active list" he minuted on 16 April 1941 when calling for interruption of supplies to Axis forces in North Africa; but Admiral Cunningham thought otherwise and objected to a planned loss of nearly one thousand men - instead he preferred to bombard the port.<sup>15</sup> Earlier in the month the Prime Minister had observed to General Wavell that "Tobruk

9. Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill, Vol.III (Docs) p.1290.

10. Ibid., p.1480.

11. Ibid., p.228.

12. Ibid., p.481.

13. Moran, Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, p.127.

14. Churchill, The Second World War, Vol.II, p.70.

15. O.H.G.S., Vol.II, p.454; Churchill, op.cit., Vol.III, p.213.

therefore seems to be a place to be held to the death without thought of retirement."<sup>16</sup> Ten months later (February 1942) Churchill instructed that same general, within whose overall command lay the defence of Malaya, that

there must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops ... The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs ... Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops.[17]

(He had the previous month minuted to the C.O.S. that "... the city of Singapore must be converted into a citadel and defended to the death. No surrender can be contemplated.")<sup>18</sup> To Wavell's successor in the Middle East, Auchinleck, Churchill signalled with reference to the defence of the Nile Delta that he wanted "defence to the death of every fortified area or strong building, making every post a winning post and every ditch a last ditch ... Egypt must be held at all costs."<sup>19</sup> And again, to the same Commander-in-Chief on 25 June 1942: "Every fit male should be made to fight and die for victory."

The year 1942, when most of these determinant directives were issued, was however, up to the Alamein victory in October, a disheartening time for those answerable for the performance of the British Army. The Director of Military Operations in the War Office, General John Kennedy, felt the situation so keenly that he took to avoiding social contacts and it is in this context of constant reverses, with no offsetting victories, that Churchill's exhortations to commanders in the field should be read. For, as Field-Marshal Sir William Slim observed after the war, many nations ordered their soldiers to fight to the death but only the Japanese actually did so: "He [the Japanese soldier]

16. Churchill, op.cit., p.183.

17. Ibid., Vol.IV, pp.87-88.

18. Ibid., p.45.

19. O.H.G.S., Vol.III, Pt.II, p.613.

20. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.359.

fought and marched till he died."<sup>21</sup> As is also evident from the Great War records, there was an air of formal convention about such orders when issued by Western governments. It is also noticeable that whereas during the entire Western Desert campaign up to Alamein the Prime Minister constantly urged his various commanders to attack, with no mention of limiting casualties, thereafter, there is an absence of instructions to achieve objectives no matter what the cost - which had been a common enough type of directive in the Great War. In other words, time and strategic or tactical context dictated when, whether and on what scale soldiers' lives should be put at risk: casualties should neither be unrealistically contained nor passively accepted.

It was, indeed, the apparently unconcerned disregard of losses in France and Flanders in the Great War with which Churchill took vigorous issue at the time. The point of going into an attack, of launching a battle was to win a victory, as this would be generally understood; if no victory resulted, the fighting could not be justified by appeal to the "grim arithmetic" of attrition. 'Attrition' has become a catchword, repeated without the definition it requires in each case. All battles are in one sense a process of attrition of the enemy's forces and resources. Yet what Falkenhayn hoped to achieve by an initially limited action at Verdun may be contrasted with one of the options advanced by Rawlinson at the Somme or again by what Brooke wished to bring about by delaying the invasion of North West Europe until 1944. If, however, by attrition is meant trading killed for killed, and prisoner for prisoner, until one side ends up with a surplus of fighting men, this was not the British army's strategy in the war at the time. Both French and Haig attacked to win and it was precisely this strategy - which was not in reality a strategy of attrition - which Churchill opposed, because he thought it could not succeed.

21. Slim, Defeat into Victory, p.538.

His biographer cites several examples of the arguments he made in vain: he wrote in a Memorandum to the Cabinet in June 1915, referring to the Allies' series of offensives so far that year: "All this hard and fruitless fighting would be tolerable if the German losses had been equal to our own. Unfortunately there are no reasons for such an assumption."<sup>22</sup> He wrote to his wife in April 1916, when he himself was serving in the line: "And in this day to day trench warfare - they lose half what we do in my opinion."<sup>23</sup> In a Memorandum unofficially circulated to the War Cabinet in November 1916, commenting on the Somme, he wrote:

It is true the limited attack has achieved a great deal in wearing down the enemy but it is a disputed question whether the attacker does not wear himself down more ... Nothing in the great operation on the Somme affords any promise of finality or of a definite decision.[24]

Both Lloyd George and Hankey agreed with Churchill that the restricted tactical situation on the Western Front nullified the contention that mere weight of numbers would win through; nor did the Allies possess material superiority, as Churchill told the House of Commons in May 1917 (when, however, he was not a member of the government):

We have not got the numerical superiority necessary for ... a successful offensive. We have no marked artillery preponderance over the enemy. We have not got the number of tanks we need. We have not established superiority in the air.[25]

Military historians have written of their agreement with these views - "... the size of the British forces in France was never enough to achieve [the militarily logical national goal of defeating the German army in the field] during the

22. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.III (Docs) p.1036.

23. Ibid., Vol.III, p.755.

24. Ibid., Vol.IV (Docs), p.28.

25. Ibid., p.60.

first three years of the war."<sup>26</sup> "The balance of comparative losses on the Western Front was decidedly against the Allies from 1915 to 1917 inclusive." The same writer concludes: "Thus no precise answer is possible as to the effectiveness of attrition."<sup>27</sup> This indicates the central weakness of the attrition argument as used at the time - which is that the British could not know the number of Germans they were putting permanently out of action, the only figure easily ascertainable being that for prisoners taken.

Furthermore, if Loos, the Somme, Arras, Passchendaele were indefensible on attrition arguments, neither could they be counted permissible operations of war on any other grounds. This was Churchill's contention; not that no offensive likely to be costly in casualties could be admitted, but that it was always a matter of strategic necessity and the chances of success. Thus Churchill certainly did nothing in the Second World War to discourage his commanders from attacking when this was both necessary and they and he knew from certain intelligence that a favourable result was most probable. This included attrition as it is commonly referred to: killing off the enemy and accepting casualties of your own. He wrote, for example, to the High Command in the Middle East in June 1942:

Although, of course, one hopes for success by manoeuvre or counterstroke, nevertheless we have no reason to fear a prolonged 'bataille de usure'. This must wear down Rommel worse than Ritchie because of our superior communications.[28]

Later in the same campaign, given the strategic need to push west to join up with the Allied armies invading French North Africa, it became essential to obtain a victory over the Axis forces drawn up against the Alamein position; but the tactical strength of the Axis defences, extensively mined and obstinately held, opposing the Eighth army possessed of

26. Millet, Military Effectiveness, Vol.I, p.43.

27. Bond, New Cambridge Modern History, Vol.XII, pp.196-198.

28. O.H.G.S., Vol.III, Pt.II, p.603.

numerical and material superiority and the will to use them meant that a battle of attrition must inevitably ensue. Within a context thus limited, where the enemy was numerically and logistically weak, attrition of a basic kind was permissible.

At the very beginning of the First World War Churchill had written: "The war will be ended by the exhaustion of nations rather than the victories of armies." Twenty-seven years later he could approve a Joint Planners' General Strategy paper for submission to the U.S. Chiefs of Staff in which blockade and aerial bombing feature as the principal methods to be employed in wearing Germany down;<sup>29</sup> and in December of that same year, 1941, at the first Washington Conference, he made the statement (though with particular reference to the Pacific): "Wars of the present scale are largely wars of attrition."<sup>30</sup> But earlier, in April 1941, he had written to Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, when the latter was visiting Greece in order to determine whether the British army should intervene: "Sooner or later we shall have to fight the Huns. By all means make the best plan of manoeuvre but anyhow fight."<sup>31</sup> Thus although it is perhaps possible to detect in Churchill's approach to military operations a hankering after 18th Century-type outcomes - that is, to gain the victory by a series of deft manoeuvres culminating in an unanswerable and surrender-forcing threat - in practice he knew that nation states capable of mobilising huge human and industrial resources were not to be subdued with facility and that modern weapons endow fighting units with such power to harm that resolute opponents will not easily succumb. In sum, he would have agreed with the gunner who wrote: "against such people as the Germans and the

29. CAB 79/13 268.

30. O.H.G.S., Vol.III, Pt.I, p.333.

31. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.III, p.181.



Japanese only hard blows and heavy fighting" would prevail.<sup>32</sup>

What emerged over the years, however, was a belief that the British in general and Churchill in particular, with their memories of the Great War, would never again countenance heavy casualty lists, whatever the operation envisaged.

This notion seemingly came to be shared by several American ministers and generals and had its part to play in the long debates at Allied summits about the feasibility and timing of the projected invasion of North West Europe - that is, of an amphibious frontal attack on the German army, followed by an advance into Germany itself. Serious divergences arose between the British and Americans as to how they could best deploy their advantages in men and material against the German army, complicated on the American side by the desire of the U.S. Navy and Marines to concentrate their resources against Japan. The clearance of the North African coast and the subsequent invasion, first of Sicily, then of Italy, along with the mounting successes of the Russian army in the east, far from simplifying the issues, in practice deepened the differences between the two Allies. Churchill, for example, ever desirous of giving assistance to the Russians, wrote in exasperation at the lack of progress at Anzio: "even a battle of attrition is better than standing by and watching the Russians fight."<sup>33</sup> But this was in Italy, which in the American view was always to be a theatre of secondary importance. The American Army, especially in the person of its Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, alive to its superiority in material (U.S. war production passed that of the U.K. in the second quarter of 1942) above all wished to invade France from across the English Channel at the earliest opportunity. They conceived of such an operation - the Second Front - as being the best way to help Russia. The North African landings, imposed by President

32. Bidwell, Gunners at War, p.222.

33. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.V, p.431.

Roosevelt for other than military reasons and assented to by the U.S. Army as an alternative to a cross-Channel operation mainly by force of logistic argument, were seen by the U.S. General Staff as a strategic half-relevance at best; and the geographical diversion of resources grew into a source of frustration for the Americans as it became clear that operations in the Mediterranean would compel a postponement of the invasion of North West Europe.

To an extent - increasingly as the Italian campaign developed and uncovered strategic opportunities unforeseen when plans had been agreed between the Allies at an earlier date in Quebec - some Americans came to believe that the British Prime Minister and his Chiefs of Staff were weakening in their resolve to defeat Germany through invasion of Hitler's Fortress Europe by way of France. The British, some Americans alleged, were procrastinating because, among other reasons, they were reluctant to accept the casualties which they thought they would incur in an amphibious operation and the fighting thereafter. They were thus unwilling to commit themselves to a definite date, even if it were as late as the Spring of 1944. As Bryant puts it: "They [the Americans] suspected that his [Churchill's] resistance to their proposals for an immediate cross-Channel attack sprang from his experiences in the First World War and the blitzkrieg and that his arguments, though seemingly unanswerable, were animated by a fear of casualties."<sup>34</sup> Eisenhower thought that General Brooke, the CIGS, opposed a "ground conflict in a large theatre [because] we should be at a disadvantage and would suffer tremendous and useless losses."<sup>35</sup> The U.S. Secretary of War, Stimson, visited London in the summer of 1943 and later reported to his President:

We cannot now rationally hope to be able to cross the Channel and come to grips with a German enemy under a British commander ... The shadows of Passchendaele and Dunquerque still hang too heavily over the imaginations of these leaders of his [Churchill's] government.

34. Bryant, Turn of the Tide, p.30.

35. Eisenhower, Crusade for Europe, p.185.

Though they have rendered lip-service to the Operation [Overlord], their heart is not in it ...[36]

At the Quebec Conference in 1943, when the invasion was confirmed as a Grand Strategy objective, Harry Hopkins told Lord Moran that Churchill had given his colleagues "the most solemn warnings of what might happen. [It was] the old, old story of enormous casualties and the terrific strength of the German fortifications."<sup>37</sup>

In an oft-quoted passage written after the war, Churchill himself states

... while I was always willing to join with the U.S. in a direct assault across the Channel on the German sea-front in France, I was not convinced that this was the only way of winning the war and I knew that it would be a very heavy and hazardous adventure. The fearful price we had had to pay in human life and blood for the great offensives of the First World War was graven in my mind. Memories of the Somme and Passchendaele and many lesser frontal attacks upon the Germans were not to be blotted out by time or reflection.[38]

Apparently basing himself on this passage, Bryant writes:

... there was an element of truth in the suspicion [on the part of the Americans that the British were trying to evade their D-Day commitments] for ... he [Churchill] feared a repetition of the senseless slaughter of the Western Front offensives of the first war and believed it possible to substitute for them an ... attack against the enemy's back-door in south-eastern Europe.[39]

One Official Historian denies the verity of the last part of that sentence, stating that "Churchill's policy in 1943 was not that of Lloyd George in 1916" because "he saw well enough the impossibility of a Balkan campaign involving substantial British or American forces".<sup>40</sup> This is surely correct: Churchill did not, in practice, advocate a policy of "nourishing" the Balkan guerillas in casualty-avoidance terms

36. O.H.G.S., Vol.IV, p.561.

37. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VII, p.477.

38. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.V, p.514.

39. Bryant, Triumph in the West, p.34.

40. O.H.G.S., Vol.V p.112.

and in any case the Americans, whose material superiority was now so marked, would have nothing to do with it. The Official Historian of a previous volume, however, does allow that the Prime Minister also differed from the Americans, initially at least, as to the form an invasion of North-West Europe should take, preferring landings at various locations on the enemy coastline to a single frontal assault, "influenced no doubt by the frightful cost and frequent failure of such assaults in the first war."<sup>41</sup>

There had, of course, been no such (amphibious) assaults in North West Europe in the Great War and as with Bryant's qualification of First World War slaughter as "senseless", there is an element of ritual in the allusion to the Prime Minister's fear of casualties on a 1914-18 scale. An American historian is more perceptive:

Having encountered the force of German arms on the Continent earlier in the war, they [the British] naturally shied away from the prospect of meeting it head-on again until it had been thoroughly weakened by attrition.[<sup>42</sup>]

This manner of proceeding had in fact been set out in a British C.O.S. paper drawn up in preparation for the Teheran/Cairo Conference:

To sum up, our policy is to fight and bomb the Germans as hard as possible all through the winter and spring; to build up our forces in the U.K. ... and finally to invade the Continent as soon as the German strength in France and the general war situation gives us a good prospect of success.[<sup>43</sup>]

The concluding words - with "chance" substituted for "prospect" - are identical with those used in the Staff paper dated 4th September 1940, already quoted: they indicate a permanent element in military judgement. The most profound criticism of the Great War offensives was precisely that they

41. Ibid., Vol.III, Pt.II, pp.624-5.

42. Greenfield, Command Decisions, p.152.

43. O.H.G.S., Vol.V, p.110.

did not offer good prospects of success: there was neither sufficient superiority in men and material, nor did the tactical conditions exist which would permit such superiority as there was, to be effectively deployed. It was this which rendered the casualties senseless. Furthermore, the Prime Minister's knowledge of British military history was extensive and he, like Brooke, was aware that failure in amphibious operations was much more common than success - even before rail and radio communications permitted an on-shore opponent to concentrate with rapidity. Add to this the political risks resulting from a stalemated invasion and there can be no wonder that Churchill was seen searching for an alternative (he pressed for months for an invasion of Norway) or that the British appeared hesitant and reluctant. The Director of Military Operations, indeed, wrote: "Had we had our way, I think there can be little doubt that the invasion of France would not have been done in 1944."<sup>44</sup>

In extreme form the British position was, as Harry Hopkins put it, that they preferred

to believe that German power could be worn down by attrition to the point of collapse, whereupon the Anglo-American forces in the U.K. could perform a triumphal march from the Channel to Berlin with no more than a few snipers' bullets to annoy them.[<sup>45</sup>]

Whatever they thought the ideal timing to be, the circumstances of their alliance obliged the British to commit themselves to invasion in 1944 and as the Prime Minister wrote to Smuts in September 1943 (Smuts himself disliking the operation): "I hope you will realise that British loyalty to 'Overlord' is the keystone of the arch of Anglo-American cooperation." This could be taken as an almost public warning to the South African, for it represented the truth; and three months later a date for the invasion was fixed. The U.S. was patently in a position to insist on a course - invasion - which no soldier could hold was unreasonable, so

44. Kennedy, The Business of War, p.305.

45. Sherwood, The White House Papers of Harry Hopkins, Vol.II, p.767.

that the obvious track for the British to follow was that of ensuring that the prospects for success were in fact good, that losses were not senselessly incurred. Thus, basing himself on the records of his subject's correspondence at the time, the Prime Minister's biographer writes: "In spite of his great doubts, Churchill's work for Overlord was continuous and whole-hearted"<sup>46</sup> and from 1st March 1944 he presided over a weekly Overlord Committee. He even wrote to Roosevelt on 12 April 1944: "I do not agree with the loose talk which has been going on on both sides of the Atlantic about the unduly heavy casualties which we shall sustain."<sup>47</sup>

It was the perilous hazard of Overlord, with the real possibility of outright repulse or an Anzio-like sealing-off of the bridgehead which gave the British pause, and the references to the previous war's long casualty lists may be seen as warnings purposefully given to a perhaps over-confident partner. They were nevertheless consistent with British pressure for a British Mediterranean strategy which may well have had the effect of delaying the cross-Channel invasion, had it been permitted. A realistic desire for a Balkan campaign, as has been noted, may be discounted, although the Official Historian writes that some Americans in mid-1943 believed that the British were looking beyond eventual German defeat to the likely political situation in the countries on the north shore of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup>

More probable as a political consideration in determining Britain's strategic proposals in that part of the world was the Prime Minister's determination to present his country - and his allies - with what the Official Historian called "an outstanding feat of British arms."<sup>49</sup> What is to happen

46. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VII, p.539.

47. Ibid., p.731.

48. O.H.G.S., Vol.IV, p.561.

49. O.H.MME, Vol.VI, Pt.III, p.143.

at the eventual peace conference is naturally at the forefront of the mind of anyone holding high office in war. The historian, D. French, has argued that Kitchener's motives in 1914 in building up the armies which colloquially bore his name was to have them in hand, trained and undamaged in 1917, by which year the Central Powers on the one hand and France and Russia on the other would be weakened through mutual attrition. Great Britain would then be strongly placed to impress its views both on friends (whose interests had in the past diverged from those of Britain in various regions) as well as on former enemies. Haig certainly strove for a British victory in 1917, before the Americans arrived in dominating strength and in a sector where the French, thitherto always the senior military partner but now distracted by mutinies, played only a minor role: Flanders.

Similarly in the Second World War Britain was already, by 1943, becoming what Edward R. Stettinius, the U.S. Lend-Lease Administrator, was to call "the junior partner of the Big Three". Plans for Overlord were by then sufficiently advanced for it to be clear that the American and British contributions would soon become quite unequal - and as a consequence the Supreme Commander would necessarily be a U.S. officer. (By the end of 1944 Churchill could write to Smuts that British-controlled armies in France were only about half the size of the Americans and would soon be less than one third.<sup>50</sup>) The Mediterranean, however, was a British command and numbers were not unequal (after seven divisions had been withdrawn for Overlord), so that in Italy a mainly British triumph was possible.<sup>51</sup> This could only have increased Britain's stature. Casualties were not a factor in this thinking but it would have had no consistency had the British not been prepared to accept some losses.

50. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.VI, p.599.

51. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VII, p.548.

The Americans, however, were insistently restrictive about the resources, in particular men and certain types of landing craft, which they were prepared to devote to the Italian campaign and Brooke had to exert himself at the Quebec Conference in August 1943 to convince his ally that the British were to be trusted in their commitment to Overlord. Whilst the Americans may not have warmed to Brooke, there is no evidence that they - or anyone else - thought that his views on casualties were any other than those of a professional soldier of his time. That he was one of the generals in the field who shared in the Franco-British defeat in May/June 1940 may have led them to believe that his respect for German arms was exaggerated, thus causing the CIGS to place too much weight on the priority need to attract the German army to Italy and there wear it down; and they may have resented his outspoken opposition to their demand that resources be released from the Italian theatre for the invasion of France from the south; but they did not criticise him, as they did other British commanders, for being over-cautious with the lives of British soldiers. His biographer records that his colleague, General Paget, said that Brooke "had little understanding of the average soldier"<sup>52</sup> and he concludes that "As firmly as Haig before him and with the same logic, Brooke believed in attrition and preached it ..."<sup>53</sup>

Equally, as far as we know, the Prime Minister never had cause to say of Brooke what Lloyd George is reported by Miss Stevenson to have said of the British Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. and therefore, by extension, of Brooke's counterpart in the First World War: "Haig does not care how many men he loses. He just squanders the lives of those boys. I mean to save some of them in the future."<sup>54</sup> Churchill was frequently critical of the Armed Services' use of manpower

52. Fraser, Alanbrooke, p.282.

53. Ibid., p.424.

54. Stevenson, Lloyd George: A Diary, entry for 15.1.1917.



but on account of the ratio of fighting men to supporting arms, not usually because casualties were being unnecessarily incurred. Brooke does, however, record one occasion when Churchill complained about British generalship and accused Alexander of throwing away lives and yet obtaining no results.<sup>55</sup> This apart, casualties did not provide a contentious issue between the Minister of Defence and the Chiefs of Staff: when they did seriously differ, in 1944 about strategy in the Far East, casualties were not a factor. That is, as between Churchill's preference for a series of amphibious operations aiming at the eventual recapture of Singapore and the C.O.S. plan for a thrust from the north through central and southern Burma to Rangoon, the estimated cost in casualties does not appear as an influence in the decision one way or the other.

Where casualty figures do assume some importance, although not as a determinant in the formulation of strategy, is in the later stages of the war, when the Prime Minister was concerned lest it were publicly thought that the British were getting off lightly. Throughout the war the Adjutant General's department produced a Monthly Return of casualties but the Prime Minister also had his own return, compiled by the 25th of each month, giving all casualties, those resulting from enemy action, those resulting from other causes and hospital admissions.<sup>56</sup> In addition he frequently called for casualty figures - British, Allied and enemy - in respect of individual operations: for example, for the Italian mainland campaign, on 1st April 1944; for the Normandy fighting, on 16 July 1944.

The Prime Minister was greatly interested in comparative figures. He wanted to know, on 18 June 1944, why British and Canadian units had fewer casualties at nine thousand than the U.S divisions (at fourteen thousand) which had not been

55. Bryant, Triumph in the West, p.180.

56. WO 162 199 c.7.

involved in such hard fighting.<sup>57</sup> (The fact was that they had experienced some very difficult combat conditions, initially, at Omaha beach.) At the end of the year, the Prime Minister asked Lord Cherwell for an analysis of comparative casualty figures for the British and U.S. forces fighting in France and was assured that the overall rates were roughly similar. There had been criticism in the American press that the U.S. army was taking more than its share of the losses. In this context the Prime Minister informed the House of Commons, in a debate on the war situation on 18 January 1945, that there were twice as many U.S. troops on the Western Front as there were troops of the British Commonwealth, adding:

We, in fact, have lost half as many as our American allies. If you take killed only, the British and Canadians have lost a larger proportion than the U.S., heavier though the U.S. losses are. We have taken measures ... to keep our Armies up to full strength, whatever the losses may be ...[58]

Then again, in mid-March, he minuted the C.O.S. that he was studying British and U.S. casualties, as set out in a summary drawn up by the CIGS, and observed that for every man killed the British had 3.25 wounded but the U.S. ratio was 1:4.25. On average the Americans had twice as many men at risk as their allies but since D-Day had had 71 thousand killed, the British 33 thousand.<sup>59</sup> On 30 April 1945 he wanted an estimate of casualties calculated on the assumption that the war would end one month later.<sup>60</sup> Churchill was also concerned that the fact that the 1st Canadian Army was preponderantly British should be widely known.<sup>61</sup> There is nothing to suggest that light casualties were regarded, as in the First World War, as evidence of sub-standard performance

57. PREM. 3 335.

58. 407 H.C. Deb 5s 418.

59. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.VI, p.630.

60. Ibid., p.644.

61. PREM. 3 339 10.

in the field<sup>62</sup> but neither does the sensitivity to comparison denote an attitude of self-congratulation for having shorter casualty lists than one's allies.

Churchill, then, believed that casualties could be expended for victory and as a politician reckoned that the nation would follow him in that belief. As Minister of Defence it was his duty so to direct strategy as to maximise the opportunities for victory and to choose field commanders who could deliver it. Experience of fighting the German army had, however, bred caution and this was reinforced by an acute awareness of Britain's paucity of resources, especially in fighting soldiers, compared with those of his country's allies.

62. Travers, The Killing Ground, p.21.

## Chapter 15 - The Government and Casualty Communication

If Churchill, as Minister of Defence, kept himself fully briefed on casualties, the War Cabinet, over which he presided as Prime Minister, was less precisely and regularly informed as to numbers - at least as far as the written record goes. In March 1939 a War Office memorandum on the subject of the publication of casualties stated that the decision as to how this would be done would be for the Cabinet: the War Office recommendation would be that the procedure agreed by the War Committee on 29 February 1916 should be followed. This was:

Casualty lists will normally be published regularly, but they will give no indication of the date of the casualty, the number of the battalion or the theatre of war ... If occasion demands it, publication of lists will be held over and then proceeded with by instalments.[1]

At a meeting of the Cabinet on 11 September 1939 approval was given to continue the precedent as set in the Great War, with each Service publishing its own lists.<sup>2</sup> The RAF<sup>3</sup> and RN<sup>4</sup> did in practice set their own rules, the latter stating that if it were well-known that a ship had been sunk, loss of life would be given but if not, casualties would be published in Miscellaneous Lists, which was satisfactory enough since "naval casualties are not as a rule heavy enough to represent a significant proportion of the nation's manpower." In other words, it was long published lists which drew attention to themselves: short lists were preferable in propaganda terms. Bunching of army lists could not be avoided, however, but some distraction from army casualties was provided by the fairly frequent and often quite long RAF lists. There were no complaints about the publication of casualties and a War Office Memo of 26 July 1941 stated that: "... publication of

1. WO 162 199
2. CAB 65 1 12(39)7
3. CAB 80 38 COS (42) 448
4. CAB 80 38 COS (42) 449

casualties now takes place within a comparatively short time of notification of the casualty in the Daily List."<sup>5</sup> This latter document was compiled by the Adjutant General's Department, which had a special Casualty Branch, and was the basis for notification to next of kin, which was always the first step in the publication process.

With this decision behind them, the War Cabinet were only asked to take action in matters involving casualties - or to confirm action taken by the Prime Minister - where decisions on manpower allocation were required. (This subject will be treated later.) Casualties were noted when discussions on desertion and civilian morale were held, but the War Cabinet's most frequent acquaintance with this aspect of the fighting came through the Weekly Resume of the Naval, Military and Air Situation, compiled by the Secretariat. These were tabled weekly except for a short period at the very beginning of 1940, when there was little to report. They gave a general view of the war on all fronts, not just those where the British were fighting, but they were somewhat more detailed where British units were in action. Even then, more usually than not, no figures for casualties were given. For example, reporting the fighting round Tobruk in April 1941, the Weekly Resumes stated:

Our casualties in these operations were light [and]  
Casualties have not yet been fully assessed but it is  
believed that in all these operations the balance is in  
our favour.

At the end of that year, describing the actions in Malaya, the Resume refers to "heavy" and "severe" casualties - reminiscent of the reporting in the First World War. When Tobruk fell on 21 June 1942, the Resume gave no numbers concerning the garrison which had surrendered, as it did not when Singapore gave in the previous February. General reporting of this nature continued until the end of the war, e.g. in March 1943 the Resume declared: "Despite considerable casualties, this attack was successful ...", the operation

referred to being the first moves against the Mareth Line; or in Italy in May 1944: "Generally speaking, our casualties have not been unreasonably heavy" but the enemy "will have suffered heavily in killed and wounded." In late June 1944 in Normandy the Resume reported: "There has been bitter and continuous fighting in the Tilly-sur-Seulles area resulting in considerable losses to the enemy" but no British casualty figures are given; nor were they when some details of the operations in Burma were given in May 1945, although it stated that the Japanese were being killed at a rate of two hundred a day.<sup>6</sup> The frequent indications of enemy losses, alongside references to British losses which were usually unquantified - where they were not omitted altogether - again reminds the reader of practice in the first war, when GHQ was attempting to persuade the authorities in London that the German army was being worn down more quickly than its opponent. Indeed, the Resumes read more like Press communiques than objective summaries.

The War Cabinet was provided, at seemingly irregular intervals, with more precise information on military casualties (the Resumes always gave civilian losses) in Confidential Annexes to the Secretary's record of the proceedings: this is where figures for the Dunkirk and Cherbourg evacuations are to be found and, for example, the losses at Crete (June 1941) and the total British killed in Normandy up to 11 July 1944.<sup>7</sup> From these records alone it would not have been possible for a member of the War Cabinet to keep a continuous check on accumulating casualty totals and there is no evidence that other than the Minister of Defence himself, any one of them did so. Given the fact that up to the middle of 1943 - after nearly four years of war - they had reached for all Services a total (including POW's) of 275,844 (73,477 killed)<sup>8</sup>, low in relation to the numbers

6. CAB 66 1-67 passim.

7. CAB 65 1-57 passim.

8. 390 H.C. Deb. 5s 22.

serving and very low compared with the Great War, this is unsurprising; especially since by mid-1943 the Allies were patently beginning to win.

The government nevertheless took care to provide the House of Commons with casualty figures in addition to those to which members had recourse in the lists published in the newspapers of record. The occasions on which the minister responsible found it necessary to avoid answering questions on casualties were fewer than they had been in the First World War. The Prime Minister was also, by comparison, more attentive to the House than Lloyd George had been, in that his briefings on the war situation were ample and apparently sufficiently frequent. Churchill's government recognised the importance of what military historians have criticised Haig for not perceiving: in time of war not only public but political morale must be encouragingly tended.<sup>9</sup> The political context was dissimilar in the two wars: the war aims were far clearer in the second contest with Germany and Churchill had far easier command of both his own party and of the House of Commons than Lloyd George ever had. There was an electoral truce on both occasions and in the second, as in the first, it was broken, though not by what had been the official opposition. In the Second World War it was Sir Richard Acland and his followers who contested seats against the sitting party, but casualties were not an issue.

However in one respect governments in both wars faced the same predicament: the House of Commons would remain restive until the efforts and aspirations of those it represented were seen to bear fruit in the form of victories in the field. Thus, after 1942, the year of Alamein, there were no more votes of confidence (the last was in July of that year). As the Official Historian put it: "... and as the tide turned ... serious criticism on military issues died

9. Millet, op.cit., Intro. to Vol.I.

away."<sup>10</sup> Where such criticism had existed it was directed towards the methods by which the Prime Minister (and Minister of Defence) conducted the war, not to the number of casualties incurred or likely to be incurred by the government's military strategy. They could hardly be so, for after the retreat from Europe until the fighting in the Far East at the end of 1941, the army was not in contact with the main forces of the principal enemies; where there was action, in Libya, casualties were, as the Secretary for War, David Margesson, said in the Commons, "exceptionally light."<sup>11</sup> Even in the vote of confidence debate in late January 1942, after reverses in North Africa, the losses in Malaya and the sinking of the Repulse and Prince of Wales, casualties were queried only once, when a member wanted to know what the army had suffered in Libya.<sup>12</sup> No questions were asked in the House about the surrenders at Singapore (16 February 1942: losses 113,451) or Tobruk (22 June 1942: losses 32,220), but when confidence began to return after Alamein, Churchill could give the figure for casualties at that battle (13.5 thousand), with the qualification: "Our losses, though severe and painful, have not been unexpectedly high having regard to the task our troops were called upon to face"<sup>13</sup> - not unlike Haig's remark after the Somme. In the debate on the Address at the end of 1942 there was no mention of casualties, nor in the debate on the war situation in February 1943, when the Prime Minister reported on the Casablanca Conference.

With the invasion of Sicily (10 July 1943) and of the Italian mainland (3 September 1943), casualties became heavier, and in the parliamentary year November 1943 to November 1944 casualty figures, often for specific campaigns over periods of time, were given in the House on eight

10. O.H.G.S., Vol.VI, p.335.

11. 369 H.C. Deb. 5s 790.

12. 377 H.C. Deb. 5s 994.

13. 385 H.C. Deb. 5s 36.



occasions, usually in answer to questions, sometimes orally, sometimes written. One of the operations covered was the invasion of France (6 June 1944), when the Prime Minister stated: "... and the landings and the follow-up are all proceeding with much less loss - very much less - than was expected."<sup>14</sup> The House was kept equally well informed in the final months of the war, including a statement on 10 April 1945 giving total U.K. casualties for the whole war from 3 September 1939 to 28 February 1945 (685,638, of which 216,287 killed and missing).<sup>15</sup> Annual totals had been given every year since 1941.

There was, thus, nothing approximating to the warning about casualties given to commanders in the field by a minister in the House in January 1918. As they had done in the Great War, members pursued Service ministers with their questions on individual cases where their constituents were involved, but casualties incurred by the armies over the years did not constitute a point of friction with the government. Ministers, for their part, announced their policy on the communication of casualties to the public early in the war, on 30 January 1940<sup>16</sup>, and adhered to it throughout: e.g. as late as 31 October 1944, the Secretary for War refused to give the losses suffered by individual corps or regiments.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this, as has been seen, ministers were reasonably communicative about casualties; and when the Official Historian wrote that the Administration's relations with Parliament "proved satisfactory enough not to affect the conduct of strategy" the absence of complaints in the House and in the country about casualties assuredly made such a judgement possible.

14. 400 H.C. Deb. 5s 1324.

15. 409 H.C. Deb. 5s 1689.

16. 356 H.C. Deb. 5s 958.

17. 404 H.C. Deb. 5s 612.

## Chapter 16 - Manpower Considerations During Hostilities

Another area of the war effort upon which casualties had a bearing was manpower, often debated in the House as it had been in the previous war. In 1914/18 recruitment into the armed services (the beginning of the casualty-creating process), particularly from among those in industry who thought themselves exempt, had caused unhappiness. This was avoided in the Second World War, not because of any hint given that the government would embark only upon strategies which had avoidance of casualties as a guiding principle but because by sound planning of manpower allocation the authorities minimised the confusion and uncertainty which had arisen over recruitment in the Great War. As it turned out, however, military (as opposed to civilian air-raid) casualties in the Second World War were fewer than those suffered in 1914-18, and for reasons clear to all as the conflict unfolded.

Britain's army would be smaller than its predecessor in 1914-18 on account of other claims on service manpower, particularly by the air force which had the capability of striking directly at Germany throughout the war. The army would have many more men in support services in an era more technologically advanced (requiring in its turn more industrial skills) and fewer men in the combat units than had been the case with the Great War army. Finally, having been ejected from the European continent in 1940 and from its Far East garrisons in 1941, there was no foreseeable opportunity for the British army to get to grips with the enemies' main forces for some years - unlike the First World War, when it was fighting a main German army from beginning to end. When the British Army did eventually confront the German and Japanese armies in strength again - though never their main armies - it did so in the company of very powerful allies, so that, as one historian writes, "there was less reason to assume strategic or operational risks". He goes on to comment that the British became "more unwilling to commit forces unless operations enjoyed an overwhelming chance of

success. Undoubtedly the strain on manpower and economic resources also affected the willingness to take risks."<sup>1</sup>

That there would be such a strain was evident early on. The aim of the Chamberlain administration to raise an army of fifty-five divisions by September 1941 has already been mentioned; in the month the war broke out, a committee was set up to study what this would mean in terms of industrial requirements and it concluded it would imply a doubling of the munitions industry in one year, though it had taken two years to increase it by 50% in the first war.<sup>2</sup> Over a year later, in December 1941, another committee sitting under Beveridge declared that it would not, after all, be possible to equip fifty-five divisions by August 1941.<sup>3</sup> This was partly because of the defeat of the army in the previous Spring, when it had lost all its equipment and partly the result of the Chamberlain government's dilatory approach to the industrial difficulties of equipping rapidly expanding armed services - though it had, on the day it declared war, imposed its Schedule of Reserved Occupations which prevented "a repetition of the disastrous consequences of uncontrolled enlistment in 1914."<sup>4</sup>

With solid Labour Party and T.U.C. support, Churchill moved quickly to supply the deficiencies of his predecessor, to the extent scarce resources permitted. Overall, it was clear, "the rate at which men are taken into the services shall be closely related to the rate at which the necessary equipment can be provided" as a memorandum to the War Cabinet put it.<sup>5</sup> What that equipment should be depended, of course, on the Service for which it was intended; which, in turn,

1. Millet, op.cit., Vol.III, p.99.
2. Parker, Manpower, p.62.
3. Ibid., p.105.
4. Ibid., p.473.
5. CAB 66 19 247.

related to the strategy adopted. For the army during the last half of 1940 and nearly all of the following year, this strategy prescribed a defensive posture in the home islands but with an early turn to the attack in the Middle East and possibly elsewhere thereafter. In March 1941 the Prime Minister insisted that in the process of allocating manpower, the army be given a specific number of recruits to work to and that it should not be permissible for it to state its demands in terms of divisions. Because a division was the basic integral fighting unit, this had been its practice previously; but the number of men required to fight a division within a Corps always turned out to be many more than the figure arrived at by a simple computation in terms of constituent battalions. In the Great War this circumstance had caused misunderstandings between the civilian manpower planners and their military counterparts. It was likely to recur in more acute form in the second war. The reason was that in a mechanised (and 'welfare') army, the number of support troops grew substantially in relation to the number of 'rifles'. Eventually the total number of men initially allocated to the army, after agreement with Churchill, was 2,374,800 (September 1941), to be raised by the middle of 1942.

Casualties in the only fighting going on in 1941 were measured in hundreds. As the Secretary for War said in the House of Commons in February 1942: "... though by 1914 standards our casualties in the field have been light, the problem of the proper distribution of manpower, particularly of skilled manpower, has become more and more difficult."<sup>6</sup> (It is noteworthy that even two and a half years into the second war, some still spoke in terms of the casualties incurred in the first war.) The balance between the numbers recruited into the Armed Services, (less predicted casualties), and the supply of munitions was of prime

importance to the successful prosecution of the war. During 1942, however, the strategic outlook began to change. With the U.S. now alongside them, committed to defeating Germany before Japan, and with a diminishing likelihood of a German invasion, the British army began to think with firm intention of offensive action. In a paper dated 26 March 1942 and headed "Requirements for Victory" the CIGS stipulated that industrial production be directed in accordance with strategic needs<sup>7</sup> - which the Chief of the Air Staff feared could mean that resources hitherto channelled to aircraft production should be diverted in part to satisfying the army's demands. This may indeed have been so: the army general staff thought that Bomber Command absorbed too much of the national output. Even by mid-1942 it was becoming a question of alternative allocation of output rather than an overall increase in which all could share. A Manpower Survey dated April 1942, covering the period to the end of that year, concluded: "We have now deployed our main forces and called heavily upon reserves..."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the army claimed an additional 250 thousand men over the figure already allocated to it, to be inducted up to April 1943; this would cover the North African campaign, which the plans said would end in January 1943.

The army contemplated yet further claims but a Survey produced by the Ministry of Labour & National Service in November of 1942, and placed before the War Cabinet, pointed out that mobilisation of manpower had, towards the end of the third year of the second war, already passed the point reached at the end of the fourth year in the Great War. He concluded:

... while it would just about be possible to meet the requirements of the Forces if they were not making increased demands and provide the labour necessary to fulfil existing munitions programmes, there are not sufficient men and women to meet all the demands of the

7. CAB 79 19 96.

8. Parker, op.cit., p.170.

Forces and at the same time continue the expansion of munitions production according to programme and maintain the existing standards and amenities of the civil population.

(He also pointed out there had been a fall in the birthrate 1921-28.<sup>9</sup>) An internal struggle for resources patently impended, and the Lord President of the Council, Sir John Anderson, was asked to clarify the issues and propose solutions. He noted that total manpower claims to the end of 1943 amounted to 2,539 thousand (the army had a target of 100 divisions) but that only 1,600 thousand (including 500 thousand women) would become available. He continued:

Manpower policy has been framed on the basis that, from 1943 onwards, our munitions industries would have passed their peak production and would be able to contribute increasing numbers of men to the Services to use the great mass of equipment built up by these industries and supplemented from American sources. Since America's entry into the war we have now to face the necessity of supplying from our own resources a vast proportion of the equipment which we had expected to draw from the U.S ... [10]

With the Armed Forces/munitions production balance at risk, the Prime Minister intervened and reduced the demands of the Services, despite his own desire to continue military operations in the Mediterranean and in addition launch a series of landings on the coast of North West Europe in 1943 (a strategy opposed by the CIGS). The army would come down from a demanded increase of 809 thousand (160 thousand women) to 429 thousand. He told the War Cabinet the army would not incur, in the operations envisaged, casualties on the scale estimated. The War Office responded with a calculation that the reduction proposed could mean four divisions less for Operation Round-up (the build-up of forces in the U.K. for

9. CAB 66 31 534.
10. CAB 66 31 539.
11. CAB 66 31 556.

the eventual invasion of the main land), or more if "average battle casualties turn out to be higher than are assumed for the present purpose."<sup>12</sup>

Casualty estimation, especially at the grand strategy planning level, constituted a most uncertain exercise. Yet because it was a key factor in manpower planning, it had to be carried through, many months before the operations were fought out and in necessary ignorance of the combat conditions which would prevail. This being the case, it was done, and could only be done on the basis of formulae extracted from experience and modified in the light of the latest figures to hand. Thus we see Churchill setting a Memorandum before the War Cabinet in which he adverts to a paper in which the "War Office had estimated their wastage by battle casualties up till the end of June 1943 at 11 thousand a month and from ordinary causes at 13 thousand a month." He goes on to state that the figures were in reality 6 thousand a month and 6,700 a month.<sup>13</sup>

The Prime Minister wrote this on 6 July 1943 - after the conclusion of the North African campaign, that is, but before the Sicilian and Italian invasions. When the latter had been in progress less than two months, the Secretary for War, Sir James Grigg, sent a Memo on army manpower to the War Cabinet in which he pointed out that the army's intake had been reduced because the War Office had been obliged to work to the new overall wastage rate of 12,700 a month but that this figure was based on the losses in the North African operations, October 1942 to May 1943 (they totalled just over 38,000). The losses to be expected in the 1943 fighting would be much higher, particularly in respect of battle casualties. This was written in October 1943. "September 1943", the Official Historian writes, "was the high water

12. CAB 66 31 570.

13. CAB 66 38 295.

14. CAB 66 42 464.

mark in the mobilisation of the manpower of the country."<sup>15</sup> From that date on, industry would shrink from natural wastage and the Forces from casualties. On 1st November 1943 the Prime Minister wrote:

Our problem is no longer one of closing a gap between supply and requirements. Our manpower is now fully mobilised for the war effort. We cannot add to the total; on the contrary, it is already dwindling. All we can do is to make within that total such changes as the strategy of the war demands.[16]

The strategy in respect of Germany was by that date already set: all that could be changed was the period of time in which it was accomplished. If Germany could be brought to surrender by the end of 1944, it was calculated, Britain's armaments industry could be restrained from dipping into the manpower pool and the U.S. called on to make up the shortfall in the munitions. Britain's army could then be maintained at level numerical strength. If the war continued beyond 1944, even with the U.S. supplying the munitions Britain was no longer producing, a decline in the number of British troops in the field was inevitable. The consequent Allied deficiency would then have to be made good by the Americans. No realistic alteration to the basic premises of the calculation (including wastage rates), the Prime Minister intimated, would materially change the result.<sup>17</sup> Thus, if the war lasted until June 1945, the Army would by then possess four divisions less than it did six months previously.<sup>18</sup>

In the event, predictions of the extent of the fall in numbers continued through 1944, with at least four other factors complicating the issue: the start of the release of men from the Forces, the expected demands of the war against

15. Parker, op.cit., p.210.

16. CAB 66 42 490.

17. Ibid.

18. CAB 64 43 539.



Japan, the unevenness of the incidence of casualties in Europe over time and the disproportionate losses suffered by the infantry compared with the other arms. The Prime Minister tried hard to prevent army numbers falling, telling the War Cabinet in December 1944 that it was imperative to find 250,000 men for the fighting in Europe, even if this meant lowering the standard of fitness required of recruits or raising the age limit.<sup>19</sup> He continued to rail against the size of the Services' administrative tail because, as he wrote to President Roosevelt in early January 1945, "we need more fighting troops to make things move". To this end and both the RAF and the RN were 'raided' and artillery officers turned into infantry officers.<sup>20</sup> There is no official written record, however, of the Prime Minister instructing any general to ease the manpower situation by deliberately saving lives; nothing corresponding to Geddes' general warning in the House of Commons or General Wilson's admonitions to Haig in 1918.

19. CAB 79 84 4606.

20. WO 205 996.

## Chapter 17 - Army Attitudes to Casualties

Although no public admonition on the subject of casualties was directed at the generals, as had occurred in the Great War, commanders in the field were undoubtedly advised of the manpower situation and of its effect on reinforcements for their theatres. They were, however, left to draw their own conclusions as to any modifications needful for their battle plans. One historian reports Brigadier K. Strong, the (British) Chief Intelligence Officer at SHAEF, as saying that Churchill asked that Eisenhower, then Supreme Commander in North-West Europe, "if possible, should avoid too many British casualties."<sup>1</sup> What perhaps gives strongest credence to this attestation is its verbal nature. We know that Brooke preferred word-of-mouth advice to his officers. In October 1940 in a COS meeting the point was made that when briefing Commanders-in-Chief "information on war policy should be imparted verbally at meetings and should not form the subject of weekly or bi-monthly summaries issued on paper."<sup>2</sup> The Director of Military Operations confirmed this when he wrote that the CIGS liked to tackle army deficiencies in such areas as leadership, morale and discipline (all matters which in a soldier's view would be affected by casualties and any subsequent lack of replacements) by private talking to GOC's, not by issuing written orders.<sup>3</sup> Thus, although correspondence between Commanders in Chief and the Adjutant General are not to be found in the records, we may believe historians when they write that on the occasion of his visits to Italy in October 1943<sup>4</sup> and to France in July 1944<sup>5</sup>, General Adam told commanders that infantry reserves

1. D'Este, Decision in Normandy, p.266.
2. CAB 79 7 356.
3. Kennedy, op.cit., p.198.
4. Graham, Tug of War, p.118.
5. Hamilton, Monty, Vol.II, p.718.

were running out to the point that casualties could not be replaced.

Other official records support this. On 21 March 1944, preparing for the Spring offensive in Italy, General Alexander wrote to General Wilson, the Allied theatre C.-in-C. "... we cannot afford heavy casualties. As you are well aware the reinforcements situation is such that heavy casualties cannot be replaced."<sup>6</sup> By 7th July 1944 (D+30) the 21st Army Group was reporting to the War Office that "owing to the lack of manpower the British forces are less able to take heavy casualties than the Americans"<sup>7</sup> and they recorded that by that date the British had transferred to Normandy all available formations.<sup>8</sup> The Administrative History of the Group (which had an average strength of one million) does indeed state that "the campaign was waged in the face of an acute shortage of manpower."<sup>9</sup> However, the incidence of casualties suffered was very uneven over time, rising to three peaks (end-July 1944, mid-November 1944, end-April 1945), with each at a lower level than its predecessor, and dipping to considerably lower troughs (end-September 1944, end-December 1944) over the whole campaign. As already indicated, the infantry units suffered disproportionately though less than originally estimated: by October the Army Group was short by 970 officers and 11,900 other ranks in the infantry whereas the War Office had forecast a deficiency of between 32-40 thousand. As the planners had foreseen, however, some units would have to be disbanded. First to go was 59th Division and one Brigade of 49th Division, then later 50th Division, but because the crossing of the Rhine - a major operation - proved less costly than had been expected, further disbandments were avoided.

6. O.H.MME, Vol.VI, Pt.I, p.29.

7. WO 205 644.

8. WO 205 674.

9. WO 225 996.

The Official Historians of the various campaigns do not lay very great stress on the shortage of reinforcements as a determining factor in the manner in which they were fought. In the volumes dealing with the war against Japan severe difficulties in respect of the terrain, transport in all its forms and supplies generally loom larger than shortages of men - although of course General Slim had a mainly Indian and Colonial army and therefore did not look solely to Britain for replacements. In the Italian campaign, describing the aftermath of Operation Olive - the rupture of the German Gothic Line in August/September 1944 - the soldier-historian writes that "casualties, particularly amongst the infantry, had been so great that the 1st Armoured Division had to be broken up, two infantry brigades reduced to cadre and all infantry battalions brought down from four to three rifle companies". Yet when the 8th Army was seeking resources for its final assault in the following Spring

the position in Italy showed a marked improvement over the dark days of October 1944 ... There were several reasons for this. The lull in operations had reduced battle casualties to a relative trickle. Many of those wounded in the Gothic Line and Romagna battles had recovered sufficiently to return to their units.[10]

Similarly in the fighting in North West Europe: casualties had been heavy during the breakout from Normandy but in the pursuit they were light and because they were moving fast the 21st Army Group actually requested, at the beginning of September, that no reinforcements be sent. Then again, by the end of March 1945 the War Office had supplied sufficient infantry replacements to permit the Rhine crossing to go ahead - but other ranks only; the shortage of officers was never made up.

Other writers, however, do emphasise the manner in which the campaign and battle planning of, certainly, Field Marshal Montgomery and to some extent, General Sir Miles Dempsey was modified by the knowledge that reinforcements would be hard to come by. The former's Chief of Staff, General Francis de

Guingand, writing generally of Montgomery's approach, observed that a reason for his caution was his awareness of "the dwindling British manpower problem. He dare not risk a major reverse."<sup>11</sup> Montgomery's biographer quotes from a letter written to Brooke in mid-December 1942, when the Eighth army was pursuing Rommel's German and Italian forces after Alamein. Montgomery was attempting to dissuade the CIGS from invading Europe via North Africa and Italy. A prolonged large scale operation such as that, he wrote,

cannot be undertaken without certain casualties ... In all my operations now I have to be very careful about losses, as there are not the officers and men in the depots in Egypt to replace them.[12]

Later in the biography comes the passage:

at the heart of Monty's northern-thrust concept [in North-West Europe] was the distressing manpower problem in 21st Army Group, a problem that had grown steadily worse over the preceding weeks as casualties in the British sector rose ...[13]

General Dempsey's mainly infantry operation code-named Epsom - an attempt to envelope Caen by forcing the River Odon - was terminated because losses were disproportionate to progress. Infantry casualties were thus a factor in deciding Dempsey to make the next main thrust - code-named Goodwood - chiefly with armour. Tank losses were considerable (over 400) but infantry casualties (VIII Corps had total losses of slightly over 1,000 in the two heaviest days fighting) were small. Nevertheless, if the former were greater than Dempsey had planned, the latter suited his reserves position better. Another military historian quotes from an unpublished interview by Montgomery to the journalist Chester Wilmot in May 1946:

You must remember that the British Army was now a wasting asset. We had not the manpower to replace heavy

11. De Guingand, Operation Victory, p.180.
12. Hamilton, op.cit., p.72.
13. Ibid., p.787.

casualties. The War Office told me before D-Day that it could guarantee replacements only for the first month.[14]

Yet another asserts, of the British army in France, that "as casualties mounted, its numbers must remorselessly decline. This reality was at the forefront of every British commander's mind."<sup>15</sup> The same theme is repeated elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Equally prominent in the minds of those commanders, some historians allege, was the memory of the battlefields of the Great War and a predisposition to avoid risking casualties on a similar scale. With a gap of only twenty years and a few months between the end of one war and the onset of the next, it followed that the regular officers from whose number came the senior generals selected to command in the Second World War, had all seen service in the Great War, most of them in France or Flanders. For example, the historians of the Italian campaign write, referring to Operation Diadem, the assault on the Gustav and Hitler lines in Italy in May 1944:

among the team of artillery commanders ... twelve of the British brigadiers had, like he himself [Siggers, the senior Brigadier Royal Artillery] and the commander of the 13 Corps [Kirkman] all cut their operational teeth on the Western Front during the First World War.[17]

Such men, the authors later observe, had been educated to "a policy of parsimony in manpower and prodigality in firepower." The Official Historian of the Italian campaign (himself a general) wrote: "Memories of the First World casualty lists were still fresh in British commanders' minds and gave a spur to the use of artillery and air bombardment to save men's lives."<sup>18</sup>

14. D'Este, op.cit., p.250.

15. Hastings, Overlord, p.48.

16. Keegan, Six Armies in Europe, p.190; Millet, op.cit., Vol.III, p.100; Hamilton, op.cit., Vol.II, p.66; Hastings, op.cit., p.242.

17. Graham, op.cit., p.260.

18. O.H.MME, Vol.VI, Pt.III, Intro. p.xi.

Heavy use of shellfire had, of course, been a central feature of battle field tactics in the Great War and General Noel Birch, Haig's senior RA adviser, was said to have been scathing about infantrymen who expected artillery bombardment to carry them all the way to Berlin. Where Haig had failed was in devising a command structure which would permit artillerymen the freedom to deploy techniques apposite to the requirements of the tactical situation: the C-in C. himself lacked intimate knowledge of the capabilities of the artillery weapon, which he subordinated too inflexibly to infantry demands. His desire, however, was to conserve his infantry.

Despite their (normally frustrated) efforts to make their attacks less expensive in soldiers' lives, Army Commanders in the Great War nevertheless acquired reputations for wastefulness in that regard. Their successors in the second war, it is said, were concerned lest they should bring similar accusations upon themselves. They "were haunted by fear of heavy infantry casualties"<sup>19</sup> and "in their book a big butcher's bill indicated bad tactics, not steely resolve."<sup>20</sup>

One of the best-known examples of a general so-labelled was W.H.A. Gott, a Corps commander in the Eighth Army and appointed to be Commander of that Army when the Minister of Defence and the CIGS carried through their momentous changes in the Middle East Command in August 1942. The tactical situation was well-known to all concerned. For imperative strategic reasons, the Axis forces had to be defeated and cleared from the North African coast; to achieve this a battle of attrition would, as already noted in another context, be inescapable. There was no time to rely upon a slow strangulation of Rommel's supplies and the means did not exist to outflank him either by land or by sea. The Axis army had built up a defence in depth, laying some 445

19. Hastings, op.cit., p.12.

20. Graham, op.cit., p.137.

thousand mines and the attack would necessarily take place on a fairly narrow front. Yet Gott, it seems,

had not the ruthless determination, one might almost say callousness ... to face the colossal casualties in the first week of Alamein with equanimity ... [he] imagined all too keenly what casualties meant in terms of human suffering.[21]

"It is difficult to imagine him [Gott]" writes Field Marshal Lord Carver,

facing the prolonged attrition of Alamein or even planning for it ... he was greatly influenced by his experiences of the First World War ... [he] was determined to avoid a repetition of anything that even resembled First World War operations.[22]

These words were written years after the battle (at which the young Carver was present) and therefore presumably represent a fused judgement of what the author knew of Gott's character as a divisional and corps commander in the Desert fighting before Alamein, and of the "butcher's bill" for the battle when it was afterwards presented.

The fact is, nevertheless, that Gott was chosen to replace the Eighth Army commander. He was not Brooke's first choice, mainly because he bore the outward signs of having fought a series of unsuccessful actions and of having served in the Desert for an extended period. Further, the CIGS knew his own candidate's qualities at first hand. (This was Montgomery.) Yet it is difficult to believe that at that juncture in the government's affairs (it had just survived another No Confidence motion in the Commons) - and in the Eighth Army's short but unprepossessing history - a general would have been appointed to army command who attracted doubts as to the firmness of his resolve to accept the consequences of a seemingly unavoidable frontal attack. Perhaps it was thought that a combination of British superiority in materiel and the parlous logistic situation of the enemy (known through 'Ultra') would conduce to a success with

21. Hamilton, op.cit., Vol.II, p.260.

22. Carver, El Alamein, p.196.



tolerable losses now that a standstill had been achieved.

In the event Gott was killed before he could assume his post and Montgomery was appointed in his stead. Probably the most written-about British general in the war, he is commonly adjudged a cautious fighter, sparing of his men's lives. His biographer wrote that the effect of his experiences in the Great War was to sharpen his perception of what a professional soldier should be about: in particular, risks with men's lives, above a level which all soldiers must necessarily accept, should only be taken either when the situation peremptorily demands it or when success can almost be guaranteed. Otherwise (as often in the Great War) it is inhuman, wasteful - and unprofessional - to take such risks.

There is, thus, no inconsistency between the general who used his infantry to batter their way through the enemy's defences at Alamein, causing 13,600 casualties in twelve days (Montgomery called it "crumbling" the Axis lines) or could order the Canadian general Crerar to close the Falaise Gap "regardless of casualties" and the man of whom Air Vice-Marshal Harry Broadhurst could say: "I think he had enormous sympathy for feeling for the soldiers and hated casualties, loathed them."<sup>23</sup> In this latter sentiment he did, perhaps, differ somewhat from Alexander and Brooke: the biographer of the latter wrote, when the future CIGS was at the Somme: "The waste and folly of war always sickened him, but he showed, at the time, no doubt about the need ... it did not appear to ... Brooke as mindless, callous or irrelevant."<sup>24</sup> As the historians (one of them a general) of the battle for Normandy have observed: "To win any major campaign there usually has to be at least one blood bath ... when relatively

23. Hamilton, op.cit., Vol.II, p.260.

24. Fraser, Alanbrooke, p.74.

heavy casualties have to be expected and accepted."<sup>25</sup> "The professional military" as Michael Howard has observed, "did not and could not" shrink from the horrors of war in the manner evinced by Liddell Hart and others in the 1930s.

25. Belfield, The Battle for Normandy, p.117.

## Chapter 18 - The quality of British troops

In the calculation of risk, considerable weight was given both to the quality of the enemy and to that of a commander's own troops. It was not solely a matter of numbers and armaments in either case. Morale had been recognised down the centuries as the bedrock from which an army fought; and morale is usually weakened or stiffened by an army's own recent experiences, its estimation (sometimes over-estimation) of the enemy and its consequent perception of its own capabilities in relation to that enemy. It is a matter, as with the British Army in mid-1942, of self-confidence.

The German army was the opponent common to both wars. In the Great War, although a redoubtable fighting machine, it had surrendered in the field, notwithstanding the orderliness of its final retreats in 1918. Its qualities, both at staff and regimental levels, had impressed many - certainly Churchill, who therefore sought ways of winning other than by attacking it frontally in the West. He wrote to his wife from France in April 1916:

Do you think we should succeed in an offensive, if the Germans cannot do it at Verdun with all their skill and science? Our army is not the same as theirs; and of course their staff is quite intact and taught by successful experiment. Our staff only represents the brain power of our poor little peacetime army - with which hardly any really able men would go. We are children at the game compared with them.[1]

At the outset of the Second World War the COS gave no reasons to conclude that Britain and France would not again prove victorious - given time, as we have seen, to build up a modern army behind France's defences and to destroy Germany's war industries by bombardment from the air and by blockade. The defeats in Norway and France seriously eroded this confidence and respect for the German army appeared to develop into something nigh to apprehension at the prospect of

1. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.III, p.755.

meeting it. After witnessing the Germans in action in France from 10th May onwards, the COS wrote on 25th of that month that if the French were to collapse and the German army invaded England and: "succeeded in establishing a force with its vehicles in this country, our armed forces have not got the offensive power to drive it out."<sup>2</sup> Over a year later, days after the German invasion of Russia, the COS's planning staff wrote, in a document destined for the appreciation of the U.S. Joint COS (31 July 1941):

So powerful is the German army that even if the Russians are able to maintain an Eastern Front it would still be possible for them to face us in the West with forces which in the present state of German efficiency and morale we would be unable to overthrow.[3]

In similar vein Churchill is reported by one of his private secretaries as saying, a few months later (September 1941):

... a landing on the Continent could only have one outcome. The War Office would not do the job properly; indeed it was unfair to ask them to pit themselves against German organisation, experience and resources.[4]

The reversals suffered in Greece, Crete and the Western Desert added to the British Army's distress (quite apart from its flight from Malaya and most of Burma) and as Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Portal, the former Chief of the Air Staff, remarked after the war, "our army ... began to feel in their heart that they weren't the equal of the Germans." Hence the relief at the victory (even if of overwhelming force) at Alamein. Yet the subsequent fighting in Tripolitania and Tunisia - alongside the Americans - which continued for four months beyond its expected termination contributed to the doubts of the planners who would shortly begin their assessment of what it would take to defeat the German army, first on the coast of France and then inland.

2. CAB 66 7 168.

3. CAB 79 13 268.

4. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VI, p.1204.

The Overlord planning staff under General Morgan was also able to monitor the experience of the Allied Armies in Italy where the German commander, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, had won his point with Hitler regarding the feasibility of holding off the British and American attacking armies in a slow retreat up the peninsula. In January 1944 Churchill wrote: "I don't know how the Russians have beaten the main German armies if they are all like the German army in Italy."<sup>5</sup> The tactical circumstances on the two fronts - one very narrow and mountainous and the other enormously extended and varied in its terrain - were quite different but the significance of the remark lies in its direct reference to Anzio, where the Germans succeeded in sealing off the beachhead. In London, where the Overlord planners were working, as one historian writes:

The shadow of Dunkirk, Norway and Greece still hung over the Army and few of its officers believed that any cross-Channel invasion could succeed except at a ghastly price. The Combined Commanders had come to regard it as a desperate venture which would lead at best to a battle of attrition in the 1914-18 style, fought along a narrow coastal strip.[6]

This is what in fact occurred but the real potential danger to the Allied cause came not from the casualties which would be suffered but from the chances of outright defeat.

Churchill, his biographer states, was

not afraid of the Channel crossing or of the landing on the enemy coast ... [but that] by landing in North-West Europe we might be giving the enemy the opportunity to concentrate ... an overwhelming force against us and to inflict on us a military disaster greater than that of Dunkirk.[7]

This was certainly possible, the Prime Minister wrote, "in view of the extraordinary fighting efficiency of the German army."<sup>8</sup>

5. Ibid., Vol.VII, p.655.

6. Wilmot, Struggle for Europe, p.169.

7. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VII, p.533.

8. O.H.G.S., Vol.IV, p.564.

Thus the British fear, in the planning of Operation Overlord, the invasion of France, was that the situation had not sufficiently changed from what it had been in October 1942, when the Joint Planning Staff wrote:

The Russian Army is today the only force capable of defeating the German army or, indeed, of containing it. Britain and America cannot hope to challenge the bulk of the Axis forces on land.[9]

Despite the successes of United Nations' forces in Russia and the Mediterranean and in the skies over Germany, Axis debilitation had not reached the point where it was incapable of repelling or at least of sealing off an amphibious operation in North-West Europe. Hence Brooke's desire to postpone the venture until 1945 or even 1946, unless the Germans could be forced into committing more divisions to other fronts - Italy in particular.<sup>10</sup>

The reason was to be found in the nature of the operation proposed. Even if a suitable stretch of terrain could be found, landings could not be made over too wide a front for fear of the forces becoming separated, unable to link up and then being dealt with in detail. On the other hand, over-concentration of forces would lead to suffocating accumulation on the beaches and congested funnelling at beach exits, enabling the enemy to bring superior forces to bear locally with relative ease. Since logistics dictated limits on the invading forces, the Germans had to have limits imposed upon the forces they could move forward to the invasion zone - because they could not be outflanked, even by airborne units. What the Germans could do - how many infantry and armoured units they could bring up - was thus very early seen to govern the fate of the enterprise, for it was always assumed that once in position, the Germans would stay and fight, with dangerous effect. It was the risk of failure, not of casualties, which made the British - initially at least - demur.

9. Ibid., p.197.

10. U.S. Army History, Vol.II, p.68.

In these circumstances, the qualities and capabilities of their own troops were important factors in the considerations of the British commanders since they would be matched against German units with, in some cases, battle experience. The British record thus far had been patchy. Up to the first battle of Alam Halfa, Liddell Hart's judgement that the failures were principally due to poor generalship, inferior equipment and inexperience seems well-founded. At Singapore in February 1942 and Tobruk in June - which caused Churchill so much agony of spirit<sup>11</sup> - the British had been overrun, much as Gough's 5th Army was in March/April 1918 (to which the defeat at Gazala in May/June 1942 has been compared), rather than surrendering after only token resistance. At Dunkirk, when further fighting would have been equally ineffectual, Churchill had given permission to surrender "to avoid useless sacrifice."<sup>12</sup> The losses, mostly in POWs, came to 41,296 - a number worth saving.

There was, nevertheless, a feeling amongst some (it was not general) that the British army was inclined to surrender too readily. In mid-1942, during the months which saw the deepest valley in the army's misfortunes, the Secretary of State for War was asked in Cabinet to define the circumstances under which a GOC or his subordinate could call upon his troops to lay down their arms. About the same time the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Alfred Duff Cooper, contrasted the manner in which the British surrendered in the field with the way the Russians fought the German invader: there had been no street fighting in Singapore or Tobruk as there was in Voronezh. In June 1942 the C-in-C. Middle East, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, pressed the Secretary for War to have legislation passed re-introducing the death penalty for desertion and cowardice (it had been abolished in 1930), reporting that courts martial had convicted 291 men of the

11. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.343; Grigg, The Victory That Never Was, p.45.

12. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.II, p.95.

former offence and nineteen of the latter. When he was C-in-C. in Italy, General Alexander put forward the same request, since desertion especially was proving relatively easy in the theatre, but no action was taken. Mutiny and treachery remained the only military crimes carrying with them the death penalty. Even so, when the only mutiny of its kind in the British army took place - at Salerno in September 1942 when 700 men refused to go into the line - and the three principal instigators were eventually condemned to death, the sentences were never carried out: they and the other offenders were sent to cancel their convictions by fighting at the front. The mutineers, meanwhile, had been addressed by the Corps Commander General Sir Richard McCreery in person. He had promised to look into their grievances (which had nothing to do with fighting) and had persuaded them not to let their comrades down, for their help was needed at the front. McCreery saw "that a British citizen army required very careful handling."<sup>15</sup>

Other senior commanders, notably Montgomery and Slim, had realised this truth early on. Both men, like General Sir Bernard Paget commanding the Home Forces in 1943, emphasised heavily the need for training in the process of turning civilians into soldiers; this included indoctrination, in particular implanting the belief that there was nothing innately superior about the enemy. After retreating a thousand miles in three and a half months in Burma before the Japanese and after being forced back across Libya and Egypt by the Germans and Italians, both training and the inculcation of confidence were essential. But commanders in the Great War had also in their time stressed the importance of training. As far as official teaching was concerned, little had changed between the wars. A Handbook on the British Army, published by the U.S. War Office in 1943, sums up its Ally's tactical doctrine as follows:

15. Graham, op.cit., p.94.



Decisive victory on the battlefield, the ultimate purpose of the Army, can be achieved only by the offensive. Only by attack can a commander get control of the two vital factors in war - time and space.

The sole mention of casualties throughout the document relates to the need to effect their rapid evacuation.

In 1939 and during the war the British Army issued a series of Military Training Pamphlets which were designed to update the Field Service Regulations as published in 1935. In Pamphlet No.2, issued by the War Office in June 1943, it is stated:

... it is only by possession of the initiative and by vigorous offensive action that victory can be won ... The ultimate military object is to destroy the enemy armed forces as soon as is possible ... it will usually be necessary to reduce his available manpower ... before he will admit defeat. (p.2) ... The destruction of the enemy army will generally be achieved at less cost if frontal attacks against organised defences are avoided ... The mere seizure of country or ground is not an end in itself.(p.3) ... [Troops] must be imbued with the offensive spirit and the will to win at any cost.(p.7)

In Pamphlet No.23, issued first in 1939, then again without change in 1942, the need to assume the offense is again stressed:

The ultimate overthrow of the enemy demands offensive action. A successful defence may wear down the enemy but unless followed by offensive action, it can only result at best in a stalemate. The offensive gives moral superiority.(p.6) ... The final test of an army is its fighting spirit. ... Morale is primarily dependent on discipline which ... is based on ... ultimately, self-abnegation for the sake of the cause.(p.12) ... Infantry is relatively weak in the attack since it is very vulnerable without cover ... against a highly organised defence, infantry is powerless to make ground without a very heavy concentration of artillery fire and the cooperation of large numbers of tanks.(p.16)

These teachings appear in Part I. In Part IX, dealing with the infantry division in attack, the Pamphlet states:

... only in the attack can an army achieve the ultimate purpose of its being ... Sustained by the high morale engendered by the forward momentum of an army in the attack, troops must press home every advantage gained despite danger, hardship and physical and mental exhaustion.(p.1)

These Pamphlets could have been written in 1918. They do not prescribe anywhere what action a unit should take if its attack fails, nor indicate what would be a practical level of casualties for it to absorb. The doctrine of the Army was unchanged, as was also the uneven quality of its application by the various infantry regiments. Against the virtues of the regimental system could be set, throughout the whole period embracing the two wars, the major defect of fragmentation; and the same concept of individuality and separateness underlay the very incomplete integration of the various arms into one fighting machine. In the eyes of many, however, the regiment provided the most close-knit unit an army could offer the civilian soldier, giving him a sense of identity and familiarity as a foundation on which to build morale, essential if he were to be induced to take the risk of becoming a casualty.

"The trouble with our British lads is that they are not killers by nature" wrote Montgomery to Brooke in December 1942<sup>16</sup>; and it is the (not unfair) claim of the biographer of the former that he knew how "to harness the aspirations and talents of a largely citizen army, fighting on a foreign shore, and imbue it with purpose, pride and hope."<sup>17</sup> Assuredly, before the turn of the tide in late 1942, others had been dubious about the qualities of the citizen army. Wavell wrote to the War Office just after the fall of Singapore:

... we have lost a good deal of our hardiness and fighting spirit ... Until we have again soldiers ... whose first idea is to push forward and to get to grips with the enemy ... we shall not recover our morale.[18]

Kennedy, the Director of Military Operations, saw this letter and added: "We had cause on many previous occasions to be uneasy about the fighting qualities of our men. They had not

16. Hamilton, op.cit., Vol.II, p.70.

17. Ibid., p.469.

18. Kennedy, The Business of War, p.198.

fought as toughly as the Germans or Russians." Of Kennedy's direct superior, the CIGS, his biographer wrote: "Brooke had often harsh things to say of the early softness of British officers and soldiers compared to their forbears of the First World War."<sup>19</sup> Finally, recording a conversation with a depressed Churchill in February 1942, a friend wrote:

But underneath it all was a dreadful fear ... that our soldiers were not as good fighters as their fathers were. 'In 1915' Winston said, 'our men fought on even when they had only one shell left and were under a fierce barrage. Now they cannot resist dive bombers.' [20]

"I cannot get over Singapore" the Prime Minister said to his doctor, who later wrote:

Singapore was a symptom of a malady which broke out during the war ... from time to time. When the chance came, I asked some of the soldiers at the top how far the infection had spread. There was discussion about the comparative merits of the soldiers in the two wars that was not reassuring.

A few months later Lord Moran reports Churchill as saying: "I am ashamed. I cannot understand why Tobruk gave in. More than thirty thousand of our men put up their hands. If they won't fight ... [21]

With these perhaps ephemeral impressions of an older generation of Britons, their younger allies, the Americans, found some sympathy. The latter sensed the British were casualty-shy.

Mark Clark, and virtually every senior American with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower, expressed the opinion that the British were less determined in attack than the Americans. Although, they observed, British infantry were as brave or even braver than American, it performed less well. They attributed this to British commanders' need to conserve manpower and their recollections of the

19. Fraser, op.cit., p.315.

20. Gilbert, op.cit., Vol.VII, p.55.

21. Grigg, op.cit., p.45.

Somme and Passchendaele deterring them from driving their men. They believed, too, that the British junior officers were poor tacticians.[22]

General Clark was an acute Anglophobe who believed, as he wrote in his diary in January 1945, that the British "could not be depended upon 'to carry the ball.'"<sup>23</sup> He was commanding in Italy at the time, but in France also the British were viewed as being over-cautious; by contrast "Their [the Americans'] general belief in the direct assault was reinforced by profound faith in their own men ... and by their willingness to accept heavy casualties."<sup>24</sup> The latest historians of the war in Italy agree that in general the Americans drove their men harder but not to greater effect than the British; and they state, moreover, that the Germans ranked British infantry above American.<sup>25</sup>

German comment itself varied. Latterly in the Western Desert a German report had it that:

British troops fought well on the whole, though they never attained the same impetus as the Germans when attacking. Officers were courageous and self-sacrificing but rather timid if they had to act on their own initiative. NCO's were good throughout.[26]

On the other hand, having penetrated Eighth Army's defences in May 1942, Rommel remarked: "Had there been German troops holding these British positions, they could hardly have been taken."<sup>27</sup> At Salerno the Germans opined that the British were not fighting wholeheartedly and ascribed this to a general attitude, gathered from those they captured, that the

22. Graham, op.cit., p.135.

23. O.H.MME, Vol.VI, Pt.III, pp.198-9.

24. Wilmot, op.cit., p.129.

25. Graham, op.cit., p.135.

26. O.H.MME, Vol.III, p.154.

27. Sixsmith, British Generalship in the 20th Century, p.231.

war was nearly over, so why take risks?<sup>28</sup> After the landing in Normandy the Germans reported: "The British are clearly anxious to avoid heavy losses which would result from a major attack launched from the present bridgehead."<sup>29</sup> And General Bayerlein, who had fought the British in both the Desert and Normandy, wrote:

The fighting morale of the British infantry is not very high. They rely largely on artillery and air force support ... The enemy is extraordinarily nervous of close combat ... He strives therefore to occupy ground rather than fight over it.

He went to say, however, that British armour showed "good offensive spirit."<sup>30</sup>

Any German testimony has to be seen in the context of the high standards by which the German army measured its performance, which was generally agreed by its opponents to be outstanding. "As in the First World War, the German Army stood head and shoulders above their enemies in terms of doctrine, training and leadership" as a British historian has observed, concluding that because the British Army fell short in these respects, its commanders felt safer with set-piece battles, which they could control more readily.<sup>31</sup> Churchill, disgruntled, concurred:

Generals are often prone, if they have the chance, to choose a set-piece battle, when all is ready, at their selected moment ... They naturally prefer certainty to hazard.[32]

Such a preference, supported by ample evidence of caution in the field, suggests less than full confidence in subordinate commanders and the sure knowledge that against skilled opponents British infantrymen unless very carefully prepared

28. O.H.MME, Vol.V, p.308.

29. O.H.Eur, Vol.I, p.345.

30. Wilmot, op.cit., p.428.

31. McInnes, Warfare in the 20th Century, p.73.

32. Churchill, op.cit., Vol.III, p.357.

would get themselves killed or wounded but often to no avail, especially in attack.

It was not that no good British subordinate commanders emerged in the war, but that there was no great depth in their ranks - and they could be put out of action relatively (to the Great War) easily. Their opportunities to gain experience had been limited. Thus armour and infantry co-operated ineffectually from the Western Desert to Normandy; handling movement in unaccustomed conditions proved clumsy, as during the Cassino battles; and lack of opportunistic awareness made for slowness, as in the initial stages of Overlord.

Extra-ordinary competence in the field was absent at most levels of command, except in Burma, where General Slim had nearly three years, with active campaigning, to train his divisions. Recognising all these limitations, commanders were intelligently careful, which could certainly give the appearance of an unwillingness to take casualties. In Italy the British infantry did have a lower casualty rate than its allies but in the North West European campaign, American and British casualty rates, as we have seen, were roughly similar. Montgomery's much-commented caution in the latter campaign - up to the breakout - is not necessarily to be explained by a desire to save lives for political<sup>33</sup> or manpower<sup>34</sup> reasons, but by the circumstance that he was aware from his intelligence that he was fighting a battle of attrition which he knew he was winning: the enemy was being forced to commit and lose men and armour at a rate he could not afford.<sup>35</sup> The British had superior numbers of tanks and it thus made good military sense to employ them where

33. Hastings, op.cit., p.242.

34. Millet, op.cit., Vol.III, p.100.

35. D'Este, op.cit., p.395.

possible - hence Goodwood.<sup>36</sup> The same may be said about British artillery, in which context the remark of the Official Historian that "from El Alamein onwards the British adopted the policy of using shell to save lives"<sup>37</sup> need not be taken to indicate that they were over-careful about casualties.

Overall, indeed, the impression is one of a largely amateur army, neither lacking in bravery nor foolhardy, using modern weapons (especially the air and artillery) instead of infantry whenever possible but often inappropriately because of insufficient training and experience. These characteristics made for - as they had in the Great War - stolid rather than inspired tactics in the field, from Corps to company level. The historian E. L. Woodward commented that in the war in which he fought, the army was run by pass men; in the second war, Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder remarked that the Army had an excess of bravery and a shortage of brains. A recent symposium on comparative military effectiveness in the two wars concluded that the British army in the second war did not, with the exception of the later Burma campaigns, score highly.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the scenario painted by one modern historian: "... the need to avoid large casualties seems to have filtered down to the lower-level commanders, who tacitly accepted this as a desired course of action"<sup>39</sup> and by another:

... most battalion commanders made a private decision [about orders to attack and] following bloody losses and failures, many battalion commanders determined privately that they would husband the lives of their men when ordered into attack[40]

36. Millet, op.cit., Vol.III, p.119.

37. O.H.MME, Vol.I, Pt.III, p.352.

38. Millet, op.cit., Vols. I & III, passim.

39. D'Este, op.cit., p.278.

40. Hastings, op.cit., pp.136-7.

This could as well describe an inadequately trained and poorly directed force as one which feared casualties. An army competently trained and led, it may be argued, does not needlessly expose itself to losses. The Eighth Army in Italy, which did suffer fewer casualties than its American companion, the Fifth U.S. Army, hard-driven by General Clark, was by that time long serving and, as a soldier has written: "... modern war does not provide veterans but survivors: battle craft and elan decrease as the casualties rise".<sup>41</sup> Likewise, its armoured division, the Seventh, having been transferred to Normandy, performed indifferently. In France, comparing total battle casualties, the Canadians had a greater percentage killed than the British (25.5 to 21.4)<sup>42</sup>, but in mid-February 1945, comparing American with British, the percentages were almost the same, with the American fractionally higher. Measured in early January, it had been the other way round.<sup>43</sup>

The Official Historian - a soldier - in an epilogue to the story of the Middle East and Italian campaigns, wrote:

'How did the British fight?' We must reply:  
'Cautiously' The experiences of the First World War were all too fresh in British minds. Most of the senior commanders had learnt the rudiments of their trade in Flanders ...

His colleague - also a soldier - summing up the campaign in North-West Europe wrote:

Ever mindful of the casualty rates in the 1914-18 war, Field Marshal Montgomery was determined to achieve his object and gain his objectives with the minimum of loss and the exercise of good generalship.[44]

And a journalist-historian describing the run-up to D-Day writes: "There would be no shrinking from sacrifice ... but

41. Bidwell, op.cit., p.223.

42. WO 205 996.

43. PREM. 3 335.

44. O.H.Eur, Vol.II, p.353.



they could not altogether dispel from their hearts the memories of Passchendaele, Dunkirk and Dieppe."<sup>45</sup>

None of the above sources gives direct evidence in the form of statements from the commanders concerned. They were writing well after the Second World War, at a time when there would be ready public acceptance of the view that even professional soldiers would permit personal experiences in a war fought twenty-five years previously to influence their fighting techniques in the war in which they were then engaged. It is certainly permissible to question unverified views of a justifying nature, as had previously happened in the the case of the Official Historian of the Great War, also himself a soldier. As for the last quotation, which again amounts to an unverified opinion, the grouping of three heterogeneous but well-known army actions is presumably designed to have a cumulatively depressing effect on the general reader, who would be unlikely to reflect on the improbability of any soldier having been present at all three. And why should a soldier not recall Amiens, Alamein or Imphal?

A study of the Army Lists up to 1943 confirms that after the campaign in France in 1940 regimental officers, including battalion commanders, were most unlikely to have seen service in the Great War. There was a policy in the earlier conflict not to send men to France under the age of nineteen (although this was reduced from the beginning of 1918 to eighteen and a half), so that such men would have been born just before the turn of the century, which meant they would have been at least forty-two by the time, say, of the Italian campaign - too old, normally, for a wartime battalion commander. Not even all regular officers who were gazetted major in 1938 had served in the Great War and they would have passed beyond regimental service by 1943. Regular officers who attained their majority after 1939 - the officers who would have been

45. Wilmot, op.cit., p.218.

battalion commanders in 1943 - had certainly not served in 1914-18.

But in popular literature the addition of the name of a Great War battle has an almost sanctified appeal: "The Great Casualty Myth" demands ritual obeisance, from the historians of campaigns, if not from the soldiers who fought in them.

The British soldiers themselves [i.e. as distinct from their senior commanders] were too young to remember as children more than the loss of fathers, uncles and close friends. This did not deter them from fighting but they did demand that they should be given the fairest chance possible of success and hence a high probability of survival in any operation. This gave the spur to the use of materiel rather than men in British battles.[46]

46. O.H.MME, Vol.VI, Pt.III, p.368.

## Chapter 19 - Summary and Conclusion

For the British the defeat on the mainland of Europe in June 1940 brought a rapid and stark definition of their situation in terms of both grand strategy and resources. The aim of the war - the defeat of Germany - was clear to and accepted by all; the propinquity of military threat stiffened civilian morale. With experience in the Great War as a guide, full mobilisation of manpower (which this time included all women not bound up in domestic duties) for the war effort was achieved relatively early and casualties suffered by the Armed Forces were hardly a factor. Then, over the next two years, the severest 'all at once' losses were sustained in the three great surrenders: Dunkirk, Singapore and Tobruk. Whilst these undoubtedly in the eyes of some shaped doubts as to the manner in which, at the highest level, the war was being prosecuted, in the public mind prisoners of war did not equate to killed and wounded. There was no great proliferation of military hospitals, no great numbers of walking wounded in the cities.

By the time, therefore, the army began to report losses on a regular and significant basis - that is, when the Italian campaign was well into the winter of 1943 - the Allies had won victories in North Africa and at Stalingrad and were patently moving towards supremacy over Germany in all spheres. From Churchill's point of view, as a consequence, casualties could be presented to the public at home with reasonable justification. There was no potential political danger, neither from the members of the House of Commons nor from a wider public. His contention regarding the Great War had been that casualties were incurred on a large scale but, as it appeared at the time, no victory was won or even in prospect: the strategies pursued were militarily and politically difficult to defend. Such was not the case after 1943.

From that date, however, casualties as a factor began to obtrude into two other areas, not unconnected. The first was Britain's relationship with the United States. In the build-up to the final strategic move against Germany - the invasion of Normandy - Britain was pronouncedly in the position of junior partner: in particular, the claims of the Italian and Eastern Mediterranean theatres on Allied resources were limited by Washington whilst at the same time the Americans insisted on the invasion of southern France. Because of Britain's dependence on American materiel and her own full deployment of her manpower, Churchill was able neither to allocate sufficient troops of his own to Italy so as to effect a breakthrough in the only theatre where the British commanded nor to prevent his Allies (the U.S. and France) from subtracting divisions from Italy to mount what he regarded as a strategically pointless exercise.

The size of Britain's force in Italy was in practice governed by the numbers required for the major theatre, Normandy, where, while the U.S. would soon increasingly begin to outnumber the British and Canadians, it was regarded as essential to have equal numbers at the point of invasion itself - especially if a British general were to command the assault. There had already grown up an uncomfortable suspicion on the part of some Americans that the British were unwilling to risk the casualties an amphibious operation may well bring. This notion Brooke had done his best to dispel: he stressed the need to weaken the German army in France, in particular by preventing its High Command from reinforcing it from Italy, so that it would enjoy fewer of the natural advantages which fall to the defender against amphibious assault. Churchill, nevertheless, remained sensitive during the whole campaign to the charge, often made in the American press, that the U.S. Army was incurring a disproportionately heavy number of casualties.

The facts of the manpower situation in the U.K. did, nonetheless, mean that both in Italy and in France casualties

could not, eventually, be replaced. Commanders thus learned not to be prodigal with lives. This married well with the tendency of British infantry - the lives in question - not to attack until maximum firepower had been brought to bear by guns and aircraft; and not to resist when the situation was hopeless. The commanders had mostly seen service in the Great War and may, even as professional soldiers, have been influenced in their caution by their experience in actions involving heavy casualties. Yet it is hard to find direct evidence that this translated into an avoidance of casualties to the point of warping military judgement as to tactical or strategic necessity. There is, on the other hand, evidence in the Second World War of a more realistic assessment of what could be achieved by a citizen army in the field, against an ever-present awareness of manpower shortages. Infantry battalion commanders in Italy, Europe and Burma who would certainly not have served in the Great War, nevertheless led - and were followed - courageously, if sometimes cautiously.

## CONCLUSION

An obstacle to an understanding of how casualties were viewed by the British during the Great War itself is the frequent assertion by historians and others, many writing after the Second World War, that the Great War left a scar across the face of the nation. The wound underneath the scar, so goes the refrain, was inflicted by the casualties suffered, which were both inordinate and futile. To this day the words and phrases that have come down over the years are uncritically repeated as received truths. The Imperial War Museum in June 1990, for example, built a section of a trench on the Great War model as part of an "exhibition devoted to history's bloodiest ... conflict", as a report in The Times of 30 June tells us: piped over the public address system are "songs sung by soldiers on the way to slaughter" and "reminders that the horror and suffering inspired poets such as Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon to lament the futility of war."

The evidence is, however, that the war was throughout widely supported by the country and that the losses on the battlefields were not regarded as futile - and especially not so after the German offensive in March 1918.

There was great and general enthusiasm in 1914 and 1915 to join the colours voluntarily. This endorsement of the declaration of war won the approval of the intellectuals, including some who later changed their minds: "Almost all the justly famous few who set themselves to oppose the war spirit did not do so at the beginning, in August, when it counted, but only after some interval of time,"<sup>1</sup> One such was Bertrand Russell, but he and those who shared his opinions remained a minority. Christians and socialists, on both sides, were likewise prepared to fight: as the Italian historian, Benedetto Croce put it "... the actors of world

1. Stromberg, Redemption by War, p.5.

history are peoples and states, not classes"<sup>2</sup> nor, he might have added, churches. The reasons for inclining people towards war were many and varied but one shared by many intellectuals and common people alike was a desire to do something different, to escape from the present, a wish for adventure.

Voluntary enlistment was overtaken by conscription but this was necessary as a measure of fairness and the orderly allocation of manpower as between industry and army as well as a remedy for falling numbers. It was not resisted despite the casualty lists and the ubiquitous walking wounded and military hospitals. There was a mood of national fatigue in the second half of 1917 but in general the populace continued to support the war. Lloyd George thought this must be due to ignorance, contrived by the censors, of conditions in France and Flanders: since the beginning he had shown himself aware of what heavy casualties inflicted on a citizen army could signify in political terms. The absence of mass media (especially television) as we experience them today undoubtedly meant that there was a general unawareness as to the nature of the fighting, even as to the scale of the casualties; but in this last particular the number of killed and seriously wounded, about a thirtieth part of the total population, fell unevenly among households and over a period of time of more than four years.

With the increasing weight of the national effort behind the prosecution of the war, expressed through the deployment of the New Armies in the field from the second half of 1915 onwards, the war assumed its own momentum, helped by government propaganda. There was no confusion in the minds of the soldiers as to the nature of their task: it was to inflict defeat on the German army. The class of men who largely made up the Other Ranks remained, as Walter Bagehot had categorised them nearly fifty years previously,

2. Ibid., p.136.

deferential; and they believed what they were told. Such demeanour, alongside a low level of education but pride in their national identity, induced them to accept as a natural part of war the military operations to which they were committed; and also to accept the accompanying casualties. Furthermore, although later studies of the war accounted the Germans as more tactically astute, at the time it seemed to the British that the German army, with its insistence on always counter-attacking, fought in much the same manner as did their own army - and took as many casualties. Apart, therefore, from a distaste for staff officers - common in armies throughout history - there was no general disposition in the army itself, not even in memoirs privately kept, to heap scorn on its commanders for the way they conducted the fighting. Such criticism came later; and from a different quarter.

For all ranks, demobilisation after the Great War was not handled by the government as smoothly as was the case in 1945. There was a rush for employment which was satisfied in the short term by the need to replace wartime shortages. After the ensuing economic boom, which lasted for some two years, came the slump and a period of industrial unrest leading up to the General Strike in 1926. The Great War was not blamed for this. Certain of the intellectuals had hopes that changes would come about as a consequence of the war, particularly those on the left, and when they did not, their previous support of the war "became too embarrassing to face."<sup>3</sup> "By the end of the twenties most English intellectuals believed that the war had been a general and unmitigated disaster."<sup>4</sup> Other sections of society - particularly, it is suggested, those who later mourned the 'Lost Generation' - regretted there was no return to the

3. Ibid., p.10.

4. Wohl, The Generation of 1914, p.109.



Britain of before the war.<sup>5</sup> These two groups together constituted a sizeable proportion of the educated, so that their disillusionment with the peace has been assiduously and persuasively communicated down the years.

The Other Ranks returning, however, had not been told, when they were recruited, that the objective of the war was to bring about social change; only after the war when they had returned home did politicians talk to them about the social rights they had won in the field. Nevertheless it was in the area of social benefits, with the enlargement of government responsibility for unemployment relief, health and secondary education, where distinction between pre-1914 and the inter-war years was most marked.

The state saw to it, then, that the unemployed were somewhat better looked after than before; for those in employment, in the middle and lower classes the beginnings of 'consumerism' wrought a noticeable if sometimes superficial improvement in the standard of living. In numbers, they constituted the bulk of the growing audience of the BBC whose programmes reflected no particular interest in the war. Similarly, although the later twenties witnessed a considerable output of war literature, it was the increase in cinema attendance which provides the clue as to where popular tastes lay: in 1937 the cinemas sold twenty million tickets each week. The films were often American and the Great War was not a favourite theme (yet two historians of the 1930s devote twelve pages of their book to literature and only two to the cinema).<sup>6</sup> The best-known of the books were not anti-war - nor had been most of the poetry - and many have survived, as the films have not, to be read (by some) today; nevertheless, their scope for shaping attitudes was limited when compared with the screen. In like manner, the decidedly anti-war preaching of the intellectuals must have been more

5. Ibid., p.121.

6. Branson & Heinemann, op.cit., p.252.

restricted in its appeal than the histories of the period lead the reader to believe, although they are always given prominence.

As it turned out, the Second World War was to usher in an era of greater social change than the Great War had done. The inter-war years had brought more preparation of attitudes for such change than change itself. The war years themselves quickened expectations, especially after the immediate danger had passed. The soldier recruited after 1941 could perhaps have concluded that the purpose of the fighting was not merely to defeat Germany and Japan.

By 1939 the evidence from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany was such that most intellectuals could once again countenance war. For the populace at large Germany was, with the Great War in the background, a familiar and credible enemy. Stories of atrocities were unnecessary. Even confronting a strategic situation far worse than at any time in the Great War, Churchill had no difficulty in maintaining civilian morale at a satisfactory level - though his government nonetheless tended it with care and skill. Severe difficulties concerning resources, especially manpower and shipping, arose, however, at a much earlier stage in the second conflict than in the first. They had the effect of making Britain much more of a dependant in the Second World War than it had ever been in the Great War. It was in Britain's interest to attempt to ensure that this relative lack of weight was reflected as little as possible in the final settlement to be reached at the conclusion of the conflict. To this end it was needful to give as strong a performance as could be, and in a manner which would impact vividly on the awareness of the public at home and abroad. Yet since weapons were if anything more destructive (and often more accurate) in 1939-45 than they had been in 1914-18, and since the German army was as formidably efficient as it had ever been, casualties were quite likely to occur on a Great War scale - as the Eastern front showed - unless considerable

care were taken, strategically and tactically. With manpower already fully allocated by end-1942, casualties would diminish Britain's war effort and her subsequent standing relative to her allies; and a sure recipe for casualties, both the Great War and more recent experience had taught, was a frontal attack on the German army. Hence the anxious search for whatever advantage could be obtained by turning Germany's strategic flank in the central and eastern Mediterranean and the reluctance to mount an amphibious attack in Europe until the German army showed itself to be stretched and debilitated.

In the Second World War, then, the shortage of manpower and the dangerous long-term effects of not conserving it, sufficiently explain the caution of senior commanders, under firm advice as they were from the Adjutant General as to the paucity of reserves. It is unnecessary, therefore, to seek an explanation, more speculatively, through recourse to their memories of action in the Great War. There is no reason to suppose that Churchill was insensitive to the loss of British lives but equally there is no basis for the belief that he shrank, as a soldier or as a politician, from committing men to battle where there was a need and a reasonable chance of success. Britain could not in either war - though this became urgently apparent only in the latter stages of the Great War - afford waste of men: its population was too small, in war or at peace, for warfare by attrition. Churchill therefore opposed operations where casualties without result was the likely outcome. In practice, because of the impossibility of verifying accurately the number of the enemy's casualties (and reliance on intelligence concerning the rotation of his units in the line was too uncertain) attrition could not be the basis of successful strategy. It was not perceived to be so at the time during the Great War. Numbers of infantry were important but in the context of a breakthrough. It was not doubted that Haig and his commanders aimed for clearcut victory - it was their optimistic expectations in the face of all evidence and

experience which were questioned. Justification of attrition emerged as an argument to compensate for the failure to breakthrough, on the lines of "Naturally, we knew we were winning all the time." As with other men, generals are reluctant to admit that their plans have gone awry. Haig had a parallel in Montgomery's firm assertions that the fighting in the initial stages of the invasion was proceeding exactly as foreseen. In the Second World War, as it turned out, Churchill was never required to ask the nation to accept considerable numbers of killed and wounded without some demonstrable and compensating progress, although there is little doubt that he himself was personally upset by the army's surrenders in Malaya and at Tobruk, where the forces under British command were not outnumbered.

The difficulty attending a policy of inculcating habits of caution, as in the Second World War, was that commanders would become too risk-averse. This did not occur in the Great War. Generals in that war, certainly those at divisional level, obliged their subordinates to attack when so ordered, and in the manner prescribed, there being no question of allowing them sometimes to exercise caution and sometimes not. They, however, were inhibited by rigidity of tactical thought, brought on by years of siege warfare. Haig realised this, so that when after the battle of Amiens in early August 1918 he perceived that the enemy was beginning to retreat, he had to instruct his commanders to take tactical risks in the offensive operations then beginning to open up which previously they would have avoided. In the Second World War commanders were enjoined by the manpower situation to husband their men and the need for a cautious approach seems to have communicated itself to their juniors, most of whom were not regular soldiers. In addition the different countries in which they fought - North Africa, Italy, North West Europe - required a flexibility in adapting tactics to changing conditions and situations which would have been difficult for an army of professionals. It was doubly so for a citizen army, hence the emphasis on training.

As a military historian has pointed out<sup>7</sup>, from the British army's point of view the two wars were more alike than is sometimes thought: in particular there was as much reliance on the infantry in the second as in the first. In neither could it be said that the British displayed a genius for war at the tactical level, except in Burma where the army had more time for training and in any case was not, in numbers, predominantly British. The Australians were critical of British infantry in the Great War, the New Zealanders and Americans in the second war, when the Germans also thought them unenterprising. There are hints that in the Second World War after the army had expanded and reliance at subaltern level was mainly upon wartime officers, there was sometimes a reluctance to lead men into danger. Probably in the Great War the tactical situation usually gave both officers and men less scope for ambiguous behaviour. These considerations notwithstanding, the disparity in casualties suffered by the army as between the two wars is accounted for by the disparity in the lengths of time it was in large-scale contact with the army of the principal enemy, Germany.

That the general social situation in the Britain which fought the Second World War was somewhat, if not radically, different from what it had been at the time of the Great War is indicated by the fact that whereas Lloyd George's government saw as its sole task the achievement of victory,<sup>8</sup> Churchill's administration was at work from an early date on plans for major changes in social and educational policy. The emphasis was to be on the rights of the individual citizen as it had been on his duty in the Great War. Such rights were at the forefront of the United Nations Charter, drawn up during the war on an American initiative, to which Britain subscribed. It may be that the social ambience in which this thinking thrived and which began to pervade Britain in the inter-war years, exercised some subtle

7. Ellis, The Sharp End of War, passim.

8. Bourne, op.cit., p.128.

influence on the manner in which soldiers comported themselves in the Second World War. Their caution converged with that of their senior commanders, who were ever mindful of dwindling numbers.

But the Great War itself in the Second World War years was of the past. The fixation with trench warfare, the constant allusion to "going over the top", the bitter criticism of the generals, the emphasis on casualty numbers, stem in large part from later generations, particularly from the 1960s when condemnation of authority was the fashion. Whatever some post-1945 writers maintain the soldiers and civilians of the Great War felt at the time, (or should have felt, even if they did not) there is no evidence that the casualty rate was widely thought to be outrageous or intolerable, nor are there reliable indications that active memories of Great War casualties in reality guided the conduct of those who fought the Second World War.

APPENDIX 1

Total British Army Casualties: All Ranks

	WW I	WW II
Killed, died of wounds	673,375	109,599
Died, unnatural causes		30,834
Wounded	1,643,469	239,673
Missing		5,677
P O W	154,308	412,985
Total	2,471,152	798,768

Notes:

- a) WW I figures are based on those given by Austen Chamberlain in the House of Commons on 4th May 1921 and follow the calculations made by J. M. Winter.[1] However, other figures are given in the government publication "Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War" and the War Office, giving comparative figures in June 1943, puts the "Killed" number at 704,803 and total casualties at 2,526,790.[2]
  - b) WW II figures are as given by the War Office (AG Stats.) on 21 January 1946 based on returns up to 31 December 1945.[3] They exclude deaths from natural causes and all female casualties.
  - c) In 1918 there were 3,759,500 men serving in the British Army; in 1945, 2,920,000
  - d) WW I lasted for 51 months and 8 days; WW II for 71 months and 12 days.
  - e) For purposes of comparison, the RAF/WAAF numbered in May 1945 1,079,835 all ranks. During the war it suffered a total of 70,253 killed and missing, all ranks (47,268 killed on operations in Bomber Command). These figures include Dominion and Allied personnel serving with the RAF.[4]
1. Winter, The Great War and the British People, p.65 et seq.
  2. WO 32 10810.
  3. WO 162 160(15A).
  4. Strength and Casualties of the Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services of the U.K. 1939-45. Cmd. 6832 HMSO 1946.

APPENDIX 2

Casualties of the British Army in North West Europe

(Mean monthly rates per 1,000 strength, all ranks)

	WW I 1914-18 inclusive	WW II 6.6.44-8.5.45
Killed, died of wounds	8.1	4.6
Missing	2.2	0.3
P O W	2.7	1.5
Wounded	28.1	13.5
Total battle casualties	41.1	19.9

Note: the figures exclude wounded who remained on duty.[5]

5. WO 205 996, App.M.



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