

Civilian and Military Power (Great Britain and Ireland)

By [Matthew Johnson](#)

Summary

By the early 20th century the United Kingdom had a well-established tradition of civilian control over the armed forces. This tradition came under strain during the Great War as the line dividing Britain's military and political establishments became blurred, and disputes arose between Cabinet "frocks" and the army "brass hats" over the direction of military strategy, relations with Allied forces, and the allocation of resources and manpower.

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Introduction

The [United Kingdom](#) on the eve of the Great War was widely regarded as an essentially civilian and constitutional state. By convention, the British armed forces were subject to a system of dual control, with command of the forces vested in officers who were responsible to the Crown, and administration vested in ministers who were answerable to Parliament.¹ These ministers – the secretary of state for war and the first lord of the Admiralty – were themselves typically [civilian politicians](#) rather than military or naval officers.

The Edwardian period saw some notable reforms in British strategic and [military planning](#), including the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) in 1902, to facilitate coordination between the services, and the establishment of a general staff and Admiralty war staff in 1906 and 1912 respectively. In some respects, these innovations served to amplify the influence of military and naval professionals. However, while soldiers and sailors sat as equals with civilian politicians and civil servants on the CID, the Committee itself

remained an advisory body, without executive powers, and the chiefs of the general staff in Britain never came to wield the power and influence enjoyed by [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) in [Germany](#).

Although broadly subordinate to civilian authority, the armed forces in Britain did not wholly refrain from intervening in the political process. The pre-war years saw tensions develop between elements in the army and the Liberal [government](#) led by [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#), in particular over the government's support for [Irish Home Rule](#). In March 1914 a group of [cavalry](#) officers at the Curragh camp, concerned that they might be ordered to suppress the Ulster Volunteer Force, resigned their commissions, sparking a minor constitutional crisis. The Liberal [press](#) accused the officers of attempting a *coup d'état*, and the episode led to the resignations of War Secretary [J. E. B. Seely \(1868-1947\)](#) and Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir [John French \(1852-1925\)](#).² However, despite inflamed passions on all sides, the supremacy of parliamentary governance was not seriously threatened. The British decision for war in 1914 was taken not by the generals but by the civilian government, with the approval of the House of Commons.

Kitchener at the War Office

Following Seely's resignation, Asquith had temporarily taken on the role of war secretary in addition to his duties as prime minister. On the outbreak of war, however, he quickly saw the need for a more permanent appointment to run the War Office. Asquith's first instinct was to recall [Richard Haldane \(1856-1928\)](#), who had served as a successful reforming war secretary from 1905 to 1912. But Haldane was regarded with hostility by many Conservatives and much of the right-wing press, who suspected him of pro-German sympathies. Instead, Asquith sent for Field Marshal [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#), the former commander-in-chief of British Forces in [South Africa](#) who since 1911 had been serving as consul-general in [Egypt](#). The choice of Kitchener proved popular with the press and public, but the appointment to the Cabinet of such a senior military officer, without any significant domestic political experience, represented a striking departure from British constitutional norms and was described by Asquith himself as a "hazardous experiment".³

Kitchener quickly made his mark on the British war effort. Rejecting any notion that the conflict might be "over by Christmas", and anticipating instead a long [war of attrition](#), he called for the creation of a continental-scale army - albeit one recruited by voluntary means rather than conscription. In response to his appeal for volunteers, hundreds of thousands of men rushed to enlist in the new "Kitchener Armies".

Kitchener's presence in the Cabinet was politically useful to the Liberals, but ministers found

him a difficult colleague. The new war secretary had little instinctive respect for politicians, believed most members of the government to be ignorant of military matters, and showed little inclination to explain his thinking to the wider Cabinet. In turn, senior Liberals quickly became disillusioned with Kitchener's secrecy and his seemingly erratic views – conspicuous in particular in his vacillation over the Dardanelles campaign in 1915.

These personal tensions exacerbated deeper, structural problems in the operation of British civil-military relations. The outbreak of war had fractured the general staff, as senior officers departed for commands with the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF). This deprived the government of an important source of expert military advice when formulating strategy. The established mechanisms of civil-military coordination were breaking down at precisely the moment when the lines dividing military strategy and civilian mobilisation were becoming blurred.⁴

Kitchener's ambiguous status as both soldier and cabinet minister also caused problems within the armed forces. The war secretary had a poor working relationship with Sir John French, now serving as commander-in-chief of the BEF, who was particularly affronted when Kitchener chose to assert his authority by wearing his field marshal's uniform during a visit to [France](#) in September 1914. The following spring, French attempted to deflect criticism for the costly failure of the British attack on Aubers Ridge by pointing to a shortage of high explosive [shells](#), which his allies in the London press attributed to mismanagement by Kitchener at the War Office. The resulting "shells scandal" added to the political pressure, which prompted Asquith in May 1915 to reconstitute his administration as a coalition government including Unionist and Labour politicians. Although French's intervention was by no means the sole factor influencing Asquith's decision, it was nevertheless a striking example of the army's willingness to challenge the authority of government ministers.

Kitchener would retain his position as war secretary in the Coalition cabinet, but with his responsibilities substantially reduced by the creation of the new Ministry of Munitions under [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#). Before the end of the year, Kitchener would be further sidelined by the appointment of Lieutenant General [William Robertson \(1860-1933\)](#) as Chief of a reinvigorated Imperial General Staff (IGS). Under the new arrangements, Robertson would be responsible for presenting strategic advice to the Cabinet while Kitchener would focus on recruiting and supplying the army.

Kitchener was killed in June 1916 whilst on a mission to [Russia](#), when HMS *Hampshire* hit a German mine and sank. His successors as war secretary for the remainder of the war – Lloyd George, [Edward George Villiers Stanley, Lord Derby \(1865-1948\)](#), and [Alfred, Viscount Milner \(1854-1925\)](#) – were all conventional politicians rather than soldiers. However, the line

dividing the political and military establishments in Britain continued to be crossed, in both directions, as serving military and naval officers entered Parliament via wartime by-elections, and sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) took commissions or enlisted in the forces. Altogether, some 264 MPs – about 40 percent of the membership of the House of Commons – served in the forces during the war, a striking total for a nation which regarded itself as engaged in a struggle against “Prussian militarism”.⁵

1916 also saw the army assume a more conspicuous and controversial political role in [Ireland](#). In response to the [Easter Rising](#) which broke out on 24 April 1916, the British government declared martial law, first in Dublin and then extending it to the rest of Ireland. On 28 April 1916, General [John Maxwell \(1859-1929\)](#) arrived in Ireland to act as the military governor, in which capacity he approved the execution of rebel leaders who had been convicted by court martial. The executions did much to harden Irish opinion against the British government, and in November 1916 Maxwell was moved to take over the army’s northern command at York. The British administration in Ireland was never fully demilitarized, however, and in May 1918, Field Marshal French was sent to Ireland as Lord Lieutenant.

Lloyd George and the Generals

Notwithstanding the particular tensions in Ireland, civil-military relations during the latter half of the war were dominated by an increasingly bitter dispute over strategy between Lloyd George, who succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, and his senior generals – Sir [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#), who had replaced French as commander-in-chief of the BEF in December 1915, and Robertson, the CIGS. In some respects, the lines of this dispute were surprising. Lloyd George had emerged as one of the strongest ministerial advocates of compulsory military service during 1915, aligning himself with the generals who wanted to maximize Britain’s military mobilization, and placing himself in opposition to his more orthodox Liberal colleagues, who wanted to pursue a “limited liability” strategy of blockading German ports and supplying Britain’s allies with funds and munitions.

The introduction of military conscription in 1916 made it possible for the British army to sustain large-scale operations on the continent. However, Lloyd George had already grown disillusioned by the [casualties](#) suffered in the great offensives on the [Western Front](#), and he became increasingly sceptical that the methods of Britain’s military commanders could secure victory at an acceptable cost in lives and resources. During 1915 he had joined with other “easterners” in the government to support initiatives such as the Dardanelles campaign and the expedition to Salonika, in the hope that victory might be achieved more cheaply by knocking out Germany’s allies. Haig, by contrast, broadly supported by Robertson, remained convinced that victory could be secured only through the defeat of the main

German armies on the Western Front.⁶ A more serious difference of opinion arose over the question of Allied unity of command, which Lloyd George came to regard as essential to countering Germany's strategic dominance over the Central Powers, but which Haig and Robertson feared might be used to subvert the operational autonomy of the BEF.

On becoming prime minister, Lloyd George sought to streamline the political direction of the war by creating a new five-man War Cabinet comprising himself, the Unionist Party leader [Andrew Bonar Law \(1858-1923\)](#), the Labour Party leader [Arthur Henderson \(1863-1935\)](#), Lord Milner, and Lord [George Curzon \(1859-1925\)](#). This centralization of political control - in contrast to the myriad sub-committees and unwieldy Cabinet debates which had characterised the Asquithian regime - strengthened the prime minister's hand. However, as a civilian "amateur", Lloyd George was on weak ground to challenge the generals' control over military strategy. Moreover, Haig and Robertson enjoyed strong support from [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#), from powerful elements in the British press, and from many of the Unionist politicians on whom Lloyd George depended to maintain his coalition government in office.⁷

After failing to shift the Allied strategic focus to the [Italian Front](#) in January 1917, Lloyd George agreed to a French proposal to place the BEF under the overall command of General [Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#), the new French commander-in-chief, who had promised a strategically decisive breakthrough with a massive offensive on the Aisne, to be launched in the spring of 1917. The prime minister's support for this proposal showed that he was not as unwilling to countenance major operations on the Western Front as his label as an "easterner" might suggest. However, his readiness to subordinate the BEF to French control would prove controversial. When the plan was revealed at the Calais Conference in February 1917 it provoked a furious response from Haig and Robertson, and Lloyd George was quickly forced to water down his proposals. Worse still for the prime minister, Nivelle's great offensive proved a catastrophic failure, precipitating widespread mutinies in the French army. With the Russian army also in disarray following the [overthrow of the Romanov dynasty](#), and with the [United States](#) - which had joined the war in April 1917 - not yet in a position to make a decisive military contribution in the European theatre, the burden of the Allied war effort fell increasingly on the BEF.

Haig now proposed a major offensive in Flanders, intended in part to facilitate the capture of the Belgian ports from which German [U-boats](#) were operating. Lloyd George was unenthusiastic, but after his support for the discredited Nivelle he was in no position to overrule his generals. The Third Battle of Ypres began on 31 July 1917. Hindered by heavy rainfall which turned the battlefield into a quagmire, British troops were unable to make the

rapid breakthrough which Haig had sought, and by the time the offensive was called off in November 1917 British casualties had reached 244,897.

The Supreme War Council

Lloyd George later described Passchendaele as “one of the greatest disasters of the War”, and an “unutterable folly”.⁸ Yet, in the aftermath of the offensive, the prime minister still hesitated to take the risk of dismissing Haig or Robertson. Rather than force a direct confrontation with his generals, Lloyd George renewed his efforts to establish effective unity of command between the Allies. At the Rapallo Conference in November 1917 he proposed the creation of a new inter-allied body, the [Supreme War Council](#) (SWC), with its own general staff located at Versailles, to coordinate the Entente’s military policy.

Robertson had long accepted the need for closer Allied military cooperation, but he immediately recognised the threat that the SWC posed to his authority as CIGS. Lloyd George’s selection of his bitter rival General Sir [Henry Wilson \(1864-1922\)](#), the former chief liaison officer to the French headquarters, as the British permanent military representative on the Council seemed to confirm his suspicion that the prime minister intended to use the SWC to weaken Robertson’s control over strategy. Certainly, Wilson’s elevation made it more difficult for Robertson to preserve a united front of military “professionals” against Lloyd George’s political “meddling”.

Tensions between the prime minister and the CIGS came to a head in January 1918 over Lloyd George’s support for the establishment of an Allied “general reserve”, to be controlled by an executive committee under French General [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#). Robertson protested that loss of control over reserves would make it impossible for the British general staff to conduct operations, and his supporters in the press – most notably the military correspondent of the *Morning Post*, [Charles Repington \(1858-1925\)](#) – launched a fierce attack on the proposed general reserve. On 12 February 1918 the matter was taken up in Parliament by Asquith, who had remained leader of the Liberal Party after Lloyd George replaced him as prime minister, and who had previously spoken out to defend military “independence” from political meddling when the Supreme War Council was established.

Lloyd George suspected that a “conspiracy” was being worked up against the War Cabinet by a “military clique” led by Robertson and supported by his “sycophants” in the press and Parliament. He later claimed that its intent had been to bring down the government and install in its place one which would make Robertson a “virtual dictator” in the mould of [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) in Germany.⁹ This was undoubtedly an exaggeration. However, by reframing a technical dispute over the control of Allied reserves as a matter of his

authority as prime minister, Lloyd George was able to shift his struggle with Robertson onto more favourable political ground. He then pressed home his advantage by offering Robertson the choice of either going to Versailles as the new British military representative on the SWC or staying on as CIGS with reduced powers. Robertson refused both options but, without support from Haig, found that he had been outmanoeuvred by the prime minister and resigned. He was replaced as CIGS by Henry Wilson.

The Maurice Debate

On 21 March 1918 the German army launched a massive offensive on the Western Front – a final attempt by [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) to win the war before the deployment of American military power could prove decisive. The brunt of the attack fell on the under-prepared British Fifth Army which quickly fell back, sustaining significant casualties and losing 21,000 troops taken prisoner on the first day of the offensive. The Allies responded to the crisis by tasking Foch with the coordination of the British and French armies and on 3 April 1918 appointed him Allied Generalissimo. By the end of April 1918 the initial German attacks had stalled, even as Ludendorff shifted his focus to other sectors of the front.

Lloyd George could take satisfaction in having rid himself of Robertson and secured his long sought-for unity of Allied command. However, his political problems with the army were not yet over. On 7 May 1918 Major-General Sir [Frederick Maurice \(1871-1951\)](#), the former director of military operations and a close ally of Robertson, published a letter in several leading newspapers, claiming that Lloyd George had forced Haig to over-extend the British share of the Allied front line, starved the army of reinforcements, and then lied to Parliament about the strength of the BEF in France.

Maurice was a serving officer and the letter was a remarkable breach of military discipline. Once again, the attack on Lloyd George was taken up in Parliament by Asquith, who demanded an inquiry by select committee. Lloyd George responded by claiming that his parliamentary statements about the strength of the British Army in France had been based on figures supplied by Maurice's own department; he did not tell the House that the War Office had subsequently sought to revise and correct those figures. This was a moment of real political danger for the prime minister, but Asquith mishandled the attack, allowing Lloyd George to insist that the matter be treated as one of parliamentary confidence in his administration. On these terms, Asquith's motion for a select committee was easily defeated.

Lloyd George had asserted his political authority over the Army and confirmed his position in Parliament, but at a cost. Ninety-eight Liberal MPs had voted with Asquith and against the government. The Maurice Debate would ultimately prove less significant as a crisis of civil-military relations than as evidence of the deepening schism within the Liberal Party – a

schism which would have significant implications for Lloyd George's future political career, and from which the Liberal Party itself would arguably never recover. In the short term, this was a price the prime minister was willing to pay. By mid-July 1918, it was clear that the gamble of the [German Spring Offensive](#) had failed; Allied counter-attacks now pushed the German armies back in a series of rapid advances, and on 29 September 1918 Haig's forces broke through the Hindenburg line, the powerful defensive system which had been established in 1917. German resistance crumbled as troops surrendered in droves and civilian morale collapsed. Ludendorff was dismissed on 26 October 1918 and the [German government](#) appealed for peace, leading to the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

Conclusion

The British system of civil-military relations responded to the challenge of [total war](#) at least as successfully as that of any other European power. Disagreements over military strategy and the allocation of resources inevitably arose. Yet economic and military demands on manpower and resources were balanced, and Haig ultimately fulfilled his promise to defeat the main enemy force on the Western Front, even as British military power was projected into secondary theatres from [Italy](#) to [Mesopotamia](#), to say nothing of the [naval blockade](#) which had done so much to strangle the German economy and erode civilian morale. Above all – and despite Lloyd George's suspicions about the intentions of the “military party” in Britain – the principle of civilian political supremacy survived the war intact.¹⁰

However, victory could not erase the bitterness which had developed during the war between Britain's leading politicians and soldiers. Many of the key protagonists, including Field Marshals French and Robertson, as well as most of the leading members of the various wartime governments, went on to publish memoirs or autobiographies after the war. By far the most successful of these – commercially and politically – were written by Lloyd George and published in several volumes between 1933 and 1936.¹¹ Lloyd George took the opportunity afforded in writing these memoirs to relitigate the controversies of the war years, describing his struggles with Haig and Robertson in terms which were highly critical of their strategic ability and, at times, their moral character.

These attacks on the generals helped Lloyd George tap into a broader wave of disillusionment about the Great War which gained strength in Britain during the 1920s. The most prominent victim of this wave was Haig, who had been hailed as a national hero in 1918 and had subsequently established himself as a prominent champion of ex-servicemen's interests, but whose reputation collapsed dramatically following his death in 1928.¹² Lloyd George's victory in the “battle of the memoirs” contributed to the establishment of a popular

narrative of the Great War which emphasised the supposed stupidity and incompetence of the military high command.¹³ The civil-military tensions of the war years thus left a legacy in Britain which was reflected not only in the realm of constitutional politics but in the popular memory of the war itself.

Matthew Johnson, Durham University

Notes

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External Links

- [HANSARD 1803–2005, Commons and Lords Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament \(UK Parliament\) \(Database\)](#)

- [Prime Minister's \(Lloyd George\) reply, 9 May 1918 \(UK Parliament\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Sheffield, Gary: Victorious Donkeys? British Generals and Generalship of the First World War Reconsidered, 11 February 2014 \(University of Oxford\) \(Video\)](#)
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