

War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Great Britain and Ireland)

By [Brock Millman](#)

Summary

When Britain entered the First World War its war aims were simple: to restore Belgian sovereignty (as it was obliged to do, by the Treaty of London, 1839), and to maintain the balance of power in Europe by defending France and chastening Germany. Britain's permanent war aims did not change. The list of contingent, instrumental and subordinate war aims, however, grew very large and ultimately many of these were mistaken as non-negotiable. This process occurred due to the requirements of coalition diplomacy, a very pessimistic assessment of the war's probable outcome in the later stages of the conflict, and the emergence, by 1917, of ideological challenges from the nascent Soviet Union and the United States.

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Introduction

A statement of war aims is, essentially, a list of things a nation at war wishes to achieve. In the Western tradition, first the Romans, and then Christendom believed that a clear statement of war aims was essential to establish that a cause was just; canon lawyers, moreover, argued that combatants in a conflict must necessarily know whether the cause was just, if they were to make sound spiritual choices.

Even were this not so, most countries at war, Western or otherwise, have traditionally attempted to establish what they hope to gain before, or soon after hostilities commenced. Victory is necessarily defined. Most wars end in negotiation. It is a good idea to establish

appropriate “facts on the ground” before ceasefire. In this sense, a statement of war aims is the ultimate expression of [Carl von Clausewitz’s \(1780-1831\)](#) dictum that war breaks out when a political agenda cannot be achieved without violence, and continues until violence has achieved the basis for a return to peaceful political intercourse.¹

This might seem a simple process, but in practice the calculation of [war aims](#) can be very difficult. Many conflicts – surely all larger ones – occur between alliances. Ultimately, the war aims of each member will have to be amalgamated with those of its allies, even if this is not always an easy or very appealing prospect. Furthermore, since a statement of war aims seeks to ensure that the military outcome is favorable to victory, the definition of what constitutes “victory” will necessarily wax and wane with assessments of how the war will probably end. Moreover, in a modern, democratic state, in which “open diplomacy” is expected,² any vision of war’s end will have to be sold to the populace, particularly as the war requires greater levels of sacrifice.

War aims, therefore, need to be qualified, segregated and reviewed periodically. Not everything on the agenda is necessarily non-negotiable and permanent. Some items may well be “contingent” – to be realized only if the military end state existing at the time of the ceasefire permits attainment through negotiations; “instrumental” – designed to facilitate the accomplishment of some other design, including peace negotiations; and “subordinate” – things it would be good to achieve, but which are not actually pre-requisite for victory.³

The calculation of British war aims during the First World War proved to be an enormously problematic process, productive of considerable postwar difficulty, when the war ended unexpectedly and in a very different manner than had been considered likely. It is thus helpful to view the revision and reconfiguration of war aims as occurring at several different moments, as the changing circumstances of the conflict required.

At the outbreak of the war “why” and “what” [Britain](#) was fighting for was very clear; indeed, these points were explicit in the declaration of war and the defence made of the decision for war in the House of Commons. Britain was at war because Belgian [neutrality](#) had been violated, and Britain was obliged by the Treaty of London (1839) to defend [Belgium](#). Moreover, it was highly likely that [Germany](#) and its allies would defeat [France](#), failing British intervention. The idea of Germany as continental hegemon was unacceptable. Therefore, a satisfactory peace would involve the restoration of the status quo in such a manner that the aggressor state, the German Empire, was properly chastened.

Very soon, the expansion of the war, particularly the entry of the [Ottoman Empire](#) on the side of the Central Powers in November 1914, and of [Italy](#) as an Allied power in May 1915,

presented what appeared to be new opportunities while demanding, necessarily, that Britain consider the requirements of coalition partners. In the aftermath of the [Battle of the Somme](#), in the winter of 1916, and with steady velocity through the last two very costly years of the war, many began to suspect that the war might be unwinnable, at least as currently configured. As a consequence, the list of contingent, instrumental and subordinate war aims burgeoned.

Moreover, two other constituencies now clamoured for satisfaction and had to be heeded if the war were to continue at the tempo it had then reached. The [Dominions](#), passive participants in 1914, increasingly demanded a voice; and, accordingly, their agendas were written into what were now “imperial war aims”. In addition, large elements of the British population demanded a hearing, particularly after the Russian collapse in March 1917, and the entry of the [United States](#), in April, produced a war that was increasingly interpreted in ideological terms.

As a consequence, the difference between what was permanent, contingent, instrumental and subordinate blurred a great deal, with even members of the Imperial strategic executive from time to time seeming to forget the distinction. When the war ended suddenly, and in such a manner that it appeared that the entire bloated list might be achievable, a misguided attempt was made to secure the whole lot. The consequences were dire for Britain’s position within a very unstable postwar world.

Permanent War Aims

At 11:00 p.m. on 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany as part of a flurry of diplomatic activity which placed Britain on the side of [Russia](#), France, Belgium and [Serbia](#) (“the Allies”) against another coalition (“the Central Powers”), initially consisting of the German and [Austro-Hungarian Empires](#). The question of why Britain was at war was never in doubt. The day before, when explaining to [parliament](#) the decision for arms, the Foreign Secretary, Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#), clearly identified the violation of Belgian neutrality by Germany as the proximate cause of war. He also indicated that war was probably inevitable in any case, since Germany’s actions over the course of the summer had revealed an aggressive intent coupled with military capabilities which, if not restrained, would unacceptably alter the balance of power in Europe.⁴ Britain’s permanent war aims followed almost entirely from its perception of its *casus belli*. Belgian independence would have to be restored. France’s position as a great power would have to be maintained and Germany would be taught a lesson. War aims did not have to be explained. As the German ambassador in London, Prince [Karl Max von Lichnowsky \(1860-1928\)](#), had periodically reminded his masters, a great power perceived as unfriendly, seeming to be playing for continental

dominance, and possessed of naval ambitions, could only be perceived as an existential threat by an island nation.

First Expansion: Coalition Diplomacy

The first expansion of British war aims commenced in the early months of 1915, and continued through 1916. The impetus, in this case, was provided by coalition diplomacy by which process Britain necessarily accommodated itself to the war aims of its allies amplified by the fact that on-going operations might have had a decisive effect against Germany's allies, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. By the time the [Constantinople Agreement](#) was concluded on 18 March 1915, Constantinople and the Dardanelles were assigned to Russia, and Persia effectively partitioned between Russia and Britain in the event of an Allied victory.⁵ According to the Treaty of London (26 April 1915), Italy was assigned large accretions of territory at the expense of both Empires, while Serbia and [Montenegro](#) were set to expand at the expense of Austria-Hungary.⁶ The division of the Arab lands still possessed by the Ottoman Empire formed the substance of the [Sykes-Picot](#) talks from November 1915 to March 1916, culminating in an agreement that Syria and Lebanon should come under French control, with the remaining territory accruing to Britain.⁷

A common feature of all of these agreements was that the division proposed was recognized by all parties as contingent upon the war ending in such a fashion that the territorial desiderata indicated could be realized. In the text of some agreements such caveats are explicit. The Treaty of London, for example, contains the phrase "in the event of total or partial partition of Turkey in Asia", relative to potential Italian territorial gains in Asia Minor.⁸ From a British perspective, of course, the coalition "war aims" thus enunciated were in no sense permanent. It is unlikely that Britain would have prolonged the war by so much as one day to establish new dependencies in the Near and Middle East, after its permanent war aims were realizable. In the event, both the Constantinople Agreement and the Treaty of London were repudiated. The Sykes-Picot agreement, however, had quite far-reaching consequences. By its action, a British sphere of influence in the Arab heartlands exclusive of Lebanon and Syria was delineated and ultimately – and unexpectedly – attained and retained.⁹

Second Expansion: Pessimism

A second expansion of war aims is associated with the movement of the war to greater totality, and with growing pessimism in British official circles in the aftermath of the Somme Offensive in 1916. The maestro of the alteration to British policy was [David Lloyd George](#)

(1863-1945), prime minister from December 1916; its military impresario, General Sir [Henry Wilson \(1864-1922\)](#), British Military Representative to the Supreme War Council from October 1917, and Chief of the Imperial General Staff from February 1918. In the main, these were instrumental war aims.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary degree of human sacrifice, the war to date had been a story of unredeemed German victory. If 1916 provided cause for doubt, according to Georges Clemenceau, premier of France 1917, “l’année terrible”, ended in such a manner that many doubted that a German victory could be avoided. In the course of that year the Russian Empire and [Romania](#) collapsed, France and Italy faltered, [submarine warfare](#) brought Britain to the brink of catastrophe. Furthermore, continued large-scale attritional fighting on the [Western Front](#) (Battle of Arras in April and May, the Third [Battle of Ypres](#) from July to November) seemed to make it clear that in the future, the sole fighting force left to the Allies capable of offensive action, the British army, must inevitably wither. The entry of the United States to the war, on 2 April 1917, promised some future relief, but, for the moment, produced new demands on Allied strength while an unready nation prepared for the contest.¹⁰

We might normally consider that pessimism would have a restraining influence on war aims, or even encourage concurrence with Lord Lansdowne that the time had come to end the war, even if this entailed acceptance of defeat, since no catalogue of war aims could be sufficient to justify the cost associated with its continuance.¹¹ In fact, Britain’s list of instrumental war aims expanded enormously, while peace feelers of all kinds – papal, American, German – were repelled. The reason for this seeming paradox – why more was desired, when less seemed attainable; why war was embraced although “victory” remained elusive – was that it seemed essential to somehow redress the depressing balance of the war to date before a peace conference could establish anything better than defeat. Even so, it seemed unlikely that a military end could be achieved that would be sufficient to secure an acceptable peace before the Americans could participate in great strength, sometime after the summer of 1919. The list of instrumental war aims consequently burgeoned. Britain did not intend to retain the things on the wish list: it hoped to gain them and then barter them for the essentials.

From the British perspective, would it not be a good thing, for example, to look for easier victories against the Ottoman Empire?¹² If Germany entered the peace conference still in possession of Belgium, Serbia, Romania, and the rest, then could the Allies at least, not secure Syria and Mesopotamia? Might not the Allies energize such local actors left in the Russian ruin as might be disposed to continue the contest? Should not some of these

territories, on the periphery of Europe, be secured to provide jumping off points for the second world war that was expected once Germany had recovered its strength. This was conceived as a fight to the finish, Britain operating from the peripheries against a Germany that dominated the continent, but neither having effective allies?¹³

Accordingly, British Imperial forces surged forward in the Near and Middle East and into Persia, while intervention in Russia was ultimately put in train. Political [warfare](#) against Germany's allies, already in progress, accelerated. Secret talks commenced, on the one hand, to entice one or other ally out altogether, while on the other hand, contacts continued with a plethora of national committees: those with the Zionists and the Arabs being the most notorious and productive of postwar consequence. Lloyd George himself could not ultimately untangle the web of contradictory promises that emerged. Was not Austria, he worried, only being kept in the war because of perceived promises made to various national committees? Were not the Turks still fighting only from fear of losing Constantinople?¹⁴

Let us recall a few facts which might make it easier to understand so much that is seemingly so inconsistent. Britain did not hope to achieve many of these things – Arab nations, Zionist aspirations, and independent [Poland](#) etc. – and would not have prolonged the war a minute for any of them. It hoped to set a fire – any fire – within the Central Powers at a desperate time in the war. At best, these “war aims” – instrumental or contingent – were what Lord [Robert Cecil \(1864-1958\)](#) had long ago called “pious aspirations”: nice things which Britain might undertake to realize as quid pro quo provided the contribution of a particular group, in this case the Allies, was sufficient to merit exceptional consideration and which circumstances at the end of the might war permit. Remember of course that the most probable end envisioned for the war was a negotiation, during which members of the opposing alliances would grope their way back to the status quo ante by exchanging conquests. Who would remember the snarl of promise, and perception of promise concerning Palestine, for example, if the war ended with a conquered Palestine returned to the Ottoman Empire in partial recompense for the restoration of Belgium?

Another factor producing expansion was the emergence, in 1917, of the Dominions and even to some extent [India](#) as quasi-independent allies. In 1914, a British declaration of war was sufficient to involve the entire [Empire](#), including the self-governing Dominions. Three years later, no Dominion considered that Britain should be permitted, without consultation, to determine policy for a war that had escalated to unimagined proportions. Over the course of 1917, therefore, Dominion premiers – [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) of [Canada](#), [William Morris “Billy” Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#) of [Australia](#), and [William Massey \(1856-1925\)](#) of [New Zealand](#) – made their way to London, accompanied by [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), Attorney General of the

[South African Union](#). Similarly, Sir [Edwin Montagu \(1879-1924\)](#), Secretary of State for India, believed that India's agenda deserved increased consideration, if only because Indian nationalists were growing increasingly restive as the war dragged on, with a much greater role forecast for Indian soldiers than hitherto, in the strategic revision that was then unfolding. In March 1917, a series of Imperial War Conferences convened with ultimate authority for the conduct of the war vested in an Imperial War Cabinet, composed of senior British statesmen and Dominion representatives. One of the issues delegated to imperial institutions was war aims.¹⁵

Dominion inputs did not change permanent British war aims; after 1917, however, the influence of the dominions on British policy is more discernible and the very concept of independent "British" war aims becomes questionable. Rather than "British" war aims, it is more appropriate to speak of amalgamated imperial war aims, including inputs from entities which did not share unity of perspective (and therefore of interest) with the United Kingdom. The war looked very different from Cape Town, Melbourne, Wellington, Ottawa or Simla than it did from London. Victory, now, was held to include the elimination of the German threat at sea, and retention of the German colonies as at least contingent war aims. The future of German South-West Africa might seem a small matter in London. It did not seem so in Cape Town.

Third Expansion: Ideological Challenges

Finally, in the aftermath of the 1916 Somme Offensive, with no end in sight, war impacts scarcely endurable, war weariness rising, and home front solidarity fracturing, it was clear that the political leadership would have to redouble its efforts to "sell" the war if it were to continue. Even if the Lloyd George government had preferred to keep consideration of war aims out of politics, developments during 1917 provided no such option.

Before the war, the line of the Second Socialist International had been clear. Inter-state wars in no way furthered the interests of a working class conceived as an international entity. "The secret of the bayonet," the story went, "is that there is a worker on either end." In 1914, however, Socialist unity had collapsed as outraged [nationalism](#) emerged as the stronger ideological force. Yet some dissident socialists remained, and, first from a base in the Swiss city of Berne, and then from Stockholm, attempted to re-assemble the prewar consensus. By 1917, a growing number of socialists and syndicalists in combatant states were willing to give them a hearing, inspired to some degree by the exciting news coming out of Russia after February.¹⁶

It is difficult to gauge the strength of this tendency in Britain in the last two years of the war.

What is clear, however, is that by 1917 significant trouble was seen on the home front, as an amalgamated dissent began to emerge. It is also clear that the dissenters were sufficiently numerous and influential to occasionally hijack larger socialist and class-based mechanisms. When, for example, a coterie of socialist parties, led by Scandinavian [neutrals](#) and the leaders of the new Russian Soviets, proposed that an international conference in Stockholm to consider the war from a class perspective, a working man's conference assembled in Leeds in Britain to discuss the proposal. From the outset, the meeting was dominated by the dissenting leadership of the Independent Labour Party and of anti-war trade unions. The meeting ended with declarations in support of the [Russian Revolution](#), of the attendance of a British delegation at the proposed Stockholm conference, and for the establishment in the United Kingdom of Soviets, along the lines previewed in Russia.¹⁷ While strenuous government management, including the mobilization of "patriotic" labour, led to the withdrawal of these demands, the challenge remained. Indeed, if anything, the call to the working class to take matters into its own hands, ending a purposeless war and beginning a purposeful revolution, redoubled in the aftermath of the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917.¹⁸ Even if this were not the case, by this juncture, simple war weariness was becoming generalized. It was clear to Lloyd George that the continuance in the war would have to be advocated.¹⁹

Another factor leading to the revision of war aims was the entry of the United States as an effective belligerent, shortly after the exit of Russia, in the spring of 1917. These events provided both the spur and the opportunity. While up to this juncture Britain might have conceived the war in traditional *realpolitik* terms, it was hardly the way in which [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) was portraying the purpose of the war to his compatriots. For Wilson, plainly, the war was a great crusade designed not only to punish perceived iniquity, but also to usher in an entirely new era in international affairs.²⁰ Much of Wilsonian idealism, rooted as it was in progressive and liberal ideas common to the entire Anglosphere, was highly persuasive.

The collapse of Russia, meanwhile, had removed what might have been a source of considerable Allied power, but had always been a tremendous embarrassment. How could the war have been displayed, for example, as a crusade to save democracy from Prussian militarism when the Allies included among their number Czarist Russia? Moreover, while the Bolsheviks might publish secret war correspondence relative to inter-Allied territorial negotiations, much to the outrage of public opinion, the October Revolution had effectively produced a virtual *tabula rasa* by nullifying most of it. The Russian capitulation permitted what Wilson compelled: reconfiguration of the war as a great crusade, a movement already

anticipated by significant portions of the British population.²¹ At a Trade Union conference in January 1918, seeking to pre-empt Wilson, who was about to publicize his own [fourteen points](#), in Caxton Hall, Westminster, Lloyd George provided the broad outlines of new, ideological war aims for the benefit of a carefully chosen patriotic working-class audience. Why had the war to be won? Was Britain fighting to put France into Syria? Far from it: the war was being fought to defend democracy and the rights of smaller nations; to end war by destroying militarism; and to produce a more just society at home. Lloyd George considered this to have been the most important speech he had ever made. It was certainly the most unfortunate. While it might have had some utility in encouraging a faltering Britain to continue down what we now know to have been the “home stretch”, it also created impossible hopes, and following the failure of those hopes, encouraged catastrophic disillusionment.²²

Conclusion

That is how things stood when, unexpectedly, German emissaries crossed the line on 30 October 1918 to request an immediate ceasefire. Germany's allies collapsed immediately. The Armistice that came into effect on 11 November registered total Allied military victory, and was effectively a capitulation in that its terms deprived Germany of the ability to reopen the war if subsequent negotiations proved unsatisfactory. Total victory had arrived, by decisive action on the Western Front, up to a year before the British leadership had expected the Allies to achieve even the basis for the negotiation of an acceptable, short-lived peace. While Britain's permanent war aims had not changed, the list of contingent, instrumental and subordinate war aims had grown considerably in the last two years of the conflict, while the new ideological focus had, in many instances, allowed the distinction between what had to be achieved and what might be permitted to become very blurred indeed. Moreover, the war had ended in such a manner that all aims could be achieved; all wartime promises and pious aspirations, therefore, presented at Paris, were to be honoured. Disappointment was inevitable, and not long in materializing. Belgium was restored; France was saved; Germany was chastened; but to most, this seemed hardly enough.

Brock Millman, Western University

Notes

1. “No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is the political purpose; the later is its operational objective”:

- Clausewitz, Carl von: *On War*, translated by Howard, M. / Paret, P., Princeton 1989, p. 579. ↑
2. Nicolson, Harold: *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method*, Toronto 1955, chapter IV. ↑
3. Millman, Brock: *Pessimism and British War Policy, 1916-1918*, London 2003, pp. 6-7. ↑
4. Statement of Sir Edward Grey, 3 August 1914, HMSO, Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, Fifth Series, Volume LXV, 1914, columns 1809-1834. ↑
5. Cocks, F. Seymour: *The Secret Treaties and Understandings*, London 1917, p. 15. ↑
6. *Ibid.*, p. 27. ↑
7. Full text of final agreement available on line at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp (accessed 1 May 2016). ↑
8. Treaty of London (26 April 1915), article 9. ↑
9. For wartime diplomacy generally, see Zeman, Z.A.B.: *The Gentleman Negotiators*. London 1971; for inter-allied diplomacy, see French, D.: *British Strategy and War Aims*. London 1986; and Philpott, W.: *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front*. London 1996. For diplomacy concerning the Near and Middle East, see Fromkin, David: *A Peace to End All Peace*. New York 1989; and Sykes, C.: *Crossroads to Israel*. Bloomington, Indiana 1973. ↑
10. Millman, *Pessimism* 2003, chapter II. ↑
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31; and, Rogister, John: *La Grande Guerre, Le Mouvement Lansdowne, et Le Parlement Britannique, 1914-1918*, *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique* 4 (2016). ↑
12. *Ibid.*, chapter V. ↑
13. *Ibid.*, chapter VII. See, especially, TNA CAB 25/68, 1918 Campaign [Wilson], 19 January 1918; and, CAB 25/68, *Projet de Note Collective Des Représentatives Militaires*, January 1918. ↑
14. NA TNA CAB 23/5, WC 313, 3 January 1918. ↑
15. *Ibid.* ↑
16. Winter, J.M.: *Socialism and the Challenge of War*. London 1974. ↑
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18. Debo, Richard: *Survival and Consolidation. The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia 1918-1921*, Montreal 1992. ↑
19. See, Millman, B.: *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War*, London 2000, especially chapter VIII. ↑
20. Kennedy, Ross: *The Will to Believe. Woodrow Wilson, World War I and America's Strategy for Peace and Security*, Kent, Ohio 2009. ↑
21. See, for example, Marrin, A.: *The Last Crusade. The Church of England in the First World War*, Durham, North Carolina 1974. ↑
22. Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent* 2000, pp. 172-173. ↑

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External Links

- [Clausewitz, Carl von: On War, London 1873 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Grey, Edward: Statement by Sir Edward Grey, 3 August 1914 \(UK Parliament\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Lloyd George, David: British War Aims, New York 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Rekacewicz, Philippe: The Middle East in 1914 \(Le Monde Diplomatique\) \(Image\)](#)
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- [Treaty of London, 26 April 1915 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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