

# **The Unquiet Western Front**

Britain's Role in Literature and History

**Brian Bond**



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## I **The necessary war, 1914–1918**

The First World War continues to cast its long shadow over British culture and ‘modern memory’ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and remains more controversial than the Second. Myths prevail over historical reality and today the earlier conflict is assumed to constitute ‘the prime example of war as horror and futility’.<sup>1</sup> Yet, without claiming for it the accolade of ‘a good war’, as A. J. P. Taylor rather surprisingly did for the struggle against Nazi Germany, it was, for Britain, a necessary and successful war, and an outstanding achievement for a democratic nation in arms.

The following, I shall argue, are the main features in a positive interpretation of the British war effort. The Liberal government did not stumble heedlessly into war in 1914 but made a deliberate decision to prevent German domination of Europe. The tiny regular army of 1914 was transformed, with remarkable success, first into a predominantly citizens’ volunteer body and then into the mass conscript force of 1917–18. The learning process was unavoidably painful and costly, but the British Army’s performance compared

well with that of both allies and opponents. In such a hectic expansion there were bound to be some ‘duds’ in higher command and staff appointments, but it would be difficult to name many ‘butchers and bunglers’ in the latter part of the war: popular notions about this are based on ignorance. Military morale, although brittle at times, held firm through all the setbacks and heavy casualties. Popular support also remained steady, although changing from early euphoria to a dogged determination to see it through. Contrary to popular belief, official propaganda played an insignificant part in sustaining morale on the home front. British and dominion forces played the leading role in the final victorious advance in 1918 on the all-important Western Front. In the post-war settlement Britain achieved most of its objectives with regard to Europe, and its empire expanded to its greatest extent. It was not the fault of those who won the war on the battlefields that the anticipated rewards soon appeared to be disappointing. Indeed on the international stage it was largely beyond Britain’s control that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles could not be enforced, and that Germany again became a threat within fifteen years.

It is once again fashionable to query the necessity for Britain’s decision to enter the First World War. Counterfactual speculation presents a seductive vision of a neutral Britain avoiding casualties and financial decline, and living in economic harmony with a victorious Germany. Moreover, we are asked to believe, a different decision by Britain in August 1914 would have prevented the Russian Revolution, the communist and Nazi regimes and most of the evils of the twentieth century. This is heady stuff but it is not a meaningful enterprise for historians.

While it was far from certain – let alone inevitable – in the summer of 1914 that Britain and Germany would soon be at war, intense rivalry and antagonism had been building up between them for several decades. As Paul Kennedy

has shown,<sup>2</sup> Britain was alarmed by Germany's rapid industrial and population growth; it was vastly superior to France according to virtually every criterion, notably in military power; and Russia's ability to offset this disparity was 'blown to the winds' by defeat and revolution in 1905. Even more disturbing, Germany's rapid naval expansion posed a clear challenge to Britain's security to which the latter was bound to respond. As Kennedy comments, it is not necessary for the historian to judge whether Britain or Germany was right or wrong in this 'struggle for mastery', but the latter's aggressive rhetoric and sabre-rattling underlined the (correct) impression that it was prepared to resort to war to challenge the status quo. It was essentially a matter of timing a pre-emptive strike. Consequently, when every allowance is made for Germany's domestic and alliance problems in 1914, the fact remains that 'virtually all the tangled wires of causality led back to Berlin'. In particular, it was the 'sublime genius of the Prussian General Staff', by its reckless concentration on a western offensive whatever the immediate cause of hostilities – namely Austria-Hungary's determination to make war on Serbia – which brought the (by then latent) Anglo-German antagonism to the brink of war.<sup>3</sup>

On the British side insurance against the perceived German threat was manifested in a treaty with Japan (1902) and ententes with France (1904) and Russia (1907). These arrangements have been widely regarded by historians as a diplomatic triumph.<sup>4</sup> In themselves they did not commit Britain to a war on the Continent, nor did the military and naval conversations with France that ensued. Nevertheless they did make it extremely doubtful that Britain could remain neutral in the event of a general war resulting from a German offensive against France.

Michael Brock has shown that as the July 1914 crisis intensified, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, his leading Cabinet colleagues and military advisers remained confident

that a limited German advance through southern Belgium would not oblige Britain to declare war.<sup>5</sup> The King was informed as late as 29 July that Britain's involvement was unlikely. Yet by 2 August the government was swinging towards intervention. This was due to the fact that France seemed in danger of defeat, and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, in particular, was under pressure from popular opinion and the Foreign Office to offer British support, though perhaps short of full intervention.

What resolved the government's doubts and ended its hesitation was Germany's brutal ultimatum demanding unimpeded passage through the whole of Belgium followed by the news, on 3 August, of the latter's refusal and of King Albert's appeal to King George V for diplomatic support. On the next day the German invasion began and Britain promptly entered the war. It would not be unduly cynical to comment that, while there was fervent support for the rescue of 'poor little Belgium', Britain's intervention was motivated primarily by self-interest: a sudden realization of the strategic dangers that a rapid German conquest of France and Belgium would entail.<sup>6</sup>

Party political considerations played a crucial role in shaping the government's actions. Already, on 2 August, before the German ultimatum to Belgium, the Conservatives had pledged their support to Asquith in support of France. This strengthened Grey's hand and undermined the hopes of waverers that a pacifist stand could be effective. Several Cabinet members confided to friends that it was better to go to war united than to endure a coalition or even risk a complete withdrawal from office. Ministers also deluded themselves that they could wage war and control domestic politics by *liberal* methods.

One prominent minister in particular embodied these dilemmas. Lloyd George abandoned his pacifist stance and supported the declaration of war, ostensibly because of

Belgium, but really because he believed that Britain's fate was linked to that of France and it would be a political disaster to allow the Cabinet to be split over such a vital issue.<sup>7</sup> In these circumstances it seems virtually impossible to believe that Britain could have remained neutral. The only issues were whether Britain would intervene at once or later, and with a divided or united government and popular support. In the event Asquith had achieved a remarkable, albeit short-lived, triumph: a Liberal government had embarked upon a continental war with only minor defections from the Cabinet, with strong party, opposition and parliamentary backing, and with bellicose popular support that outstripped that of the decision-makers in its fervour.

It is one of the paradoxes of this culmination of the Anglo-German antagonism that neither had been seriously considering war against the other when the crisis began: Britain because it was preoccupied with the real possibility of civil war in Ireland, and Germany because its faith in a short-war victory made the involvement of the tiny British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and Britain's formidable navy seem irrelevant.

However, while it is true that Germany had no immediate war aims against Britain, it is clear that an early victory over France would have had disastrous consequences. Bethmann Hollweg's September Programme, drawn up in anticipation of imminent peace negotiations with a defeated France, spoke of so weakening the latter that its revival as a great power would be impossible for all time. The military leaders were to decide on various possible annexations, including the coastal strip from Dunkirk to Boulogne. A commercial treaty would render France dependent on Germany and permit the exclusion of British commerce from France. Belgium would be, at the very least, reduced to a vassal state dependent on Germany with the possibility of incorporating French Flanders. The 'competent quarters' (that is, the



German General Staff) would have to judge the military value against Britain of these arrangements. Most important of all, victory would usher in a central European economic association dominated by Germany and with Britain pointedly excluded from the list of members.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Britain's decision to enter the war, although forced on it by an unexpected chain of events, may be viewed as both calculated and also justified by fears of what penalties might result from neutrality. Britain (and the dominions) fought the war first and foremost to preserve its independence and status as a great imperial power by resisting the domination of Europe by the Central Powers. But a second purpose, less evident until the late stages of the war, was to gain a peace settlement which would also enhance Britain's and its Empire's security vis-à-vis its allies and co-belligerents – France, Russia and, to a lesser extent, the United States.<sup>9</sup>

There was, however, a serious flaw in the government's assumptions about a war whose duration and nature it completely failed to comprehend. The government, in effect, hoped to wage a short war in terms of blockading Germany, supplying its allies with money and munitions, and despatching the modest BEF to France essentially as a token of good intent. In view of accurate pre-war assessments of Germany's industrial and military power, this stance in 1914 was highly unrealistic and was soon to be exposed as such.<sup>10</sup>

With the wisdom of hindsight it is tempting to argue that there must have been a better alternative to the blood-letting and destruction between 1914 and 1918. While this notion can be debated endlessly as regards the general causes of the First World War, it has little bearing on the specific issue of Anglo-German antagonism. As Paul Kennedy concludes, by making minor concessions Britain 'might have papered over the cracks in the Anglo-German relationship

for a few more years, but it is difficult to see how such gestures would have altered the elemental German push to change the existing distribution of power', which was always likely to provoke a strong British reaction. Unless one of the rivals was prepared to introduce a drastic change of policy their vital interests would remain diametrically opposed. Essentially, in 1914 Britain was prepared to fight to preserve the existing status quo whereas Germany, for a mixture of offensive and defensive motives, was determined to alter it.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in summing up the reasons for Britain entering the war, it is important to consider the mental outlook or moral code of thoughtful people in the very different ethos of 1914. Ignorance of the sordid realities of war allowed free play to the notion of a liberal crusade against uncivilized behaviour. If a great power were allowed to break an international agreement and invade a small neighbour with impunity, then European civilization would be seriously undermined. This outlook seemed to be accepted by all social classes and persisted to a remarkable extent for much of the war, even after the appalling costs had become clear.<sup>12</sup>

It cannot be over-emphasized that, when declaring war in August 1914 and despatching the small BEF to France, the government had no intention of fighting a long and costly 'total war'. Conscription, in particular, was anathema to most Liberals. Even Lord Kitchener, the imperial pro-consul appointed as War Minister to inspire confidence, who *did* envisage a long war from the outset, could not foresee the pressures which the Central Powers' early successes in both east and west would impose on the Entente.

Kitchener's plan was that his volunteer New Armies, raised in 1914–15, should be conserved as much as possible to ensure that Britain would be the strongest military power at the peace conference. The French and Russian armies would bear the brunt of attrition warfare in 1915–16 before

the British forces intervened in strength to deal the decisive blow. This calculated strategy was undermined by enormous French losses in the first year of the war, by similar Russian losses and a hectic retreat in the summer of 1915, and by Britain's failure at the Dardanelles. Consequently, in mid-1915, British policy-makers were reluctantly forced to conclude that, in order to save the Entente, its forces must play a full part in the continental land war. The disastrous battle of Loos in September 1915 marked the first stage in this drastic change of policy, the adoption of conscription early in 1916 the second stage, and the Somme campaign the third. The proponents of a limited war effort using only volunteer forces were overwhelmed by events. The risk of heavy casualties and bankruptcy seemed preferable to defeat.<sup>13</sup>

In retrospect it is tempting to believe that either group of allies would have done better to negotiate a 'peace without victory' once the initial hopes of a quick decision had been thwarted. But the trajectory of the war and the myriad conflicting interests involved suggest that this was never a realistic option. Germany's extensive territorial gains in 1914 and 1915 did not incline its leaders to moderation, and even the severe effects of attrition at Verdun and on the Somme in 1916 were offset by victory over Romania and confidence that Russia was tottering towards defeat. Indeed the Central Powers' Peace Note in December 1916 was prompted largely by the victory in Romania; its tone was bellicose and no specific conditions were mentioned. The Entente correctly assumed that the terms would be unacceptable. Bethmann's annexation proposals were in fact made harsher on every point by Hindenburg and Ludendorff: they opposed any territorial cession to France, required Luxembourg to be annexed, and demanded that the Belgian and Polish economies be subordinated to Germany's. After the Entente's rejection of the Note,

Hindenburg hardened his position further, demanding additional annexations in east and west. The military, naval and colonial authorities all grew more extreme in their demands. In short, German high-level decision-making was a shambles, with the military leaders increasingly dominant and unwilling to compromise.<sup>14</sup>

On the British side, the conflict was presented as not only a traditional strategy to defend the home islands and the empire, but also as a crusade for a more peaceful and democratic world order. As David Stevenson has pointed out, British policy ‘combined uncertainty and even altruism within Europe with *Realpolitik* outside’. Above all, Germany must be destroyed as a colonial and naval threat. Britain had no territorial claims against Germany, but the rhetorical aim of ‘smashing Prussian militarism’ could only be achieved, if indeed at all, through a decisive military victory. Though flexible in some respects about a settlement with Germany, Lloyd George was committed to ‘punishing aggression’ and ‘promoting democratisation’. Consequently Britain ‘remained far removed from a negotiated settlement with the Central Powers’. Even the defection of Russia and the intervention of the United States in 1917 did not alter the fundamental conviction that only a clear-cut victory would make possible a lasting peace. The extremely harsh terms which Germany imposed on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918), followed by a drive deep into the Caucasus, beyond the treaty’s terms, demonstrated what penalties the Western Powers might expect if they were defeated. President Woodrow Wilson was also now convinced that a just and lasting peace could only follow after the clear military defeat of the Central Powers.<sup>15</sup>

It is very difficult now, particularly in comparison with the Second World War, to interpret the First World War in ideological terms. Yet without a powerful input of idealism it is impossible to understand why Liberal intellectuals

such as C. E. Montague were so enthusiastic at the outbreak of war, and why 'liberal opinion' continued to support the war when its appalling costs became clear. The notion of the conflict as a crusade on behalf of liberal idealism embodied a startling paradox: war would be waged to remove the causes of war.<sup>16</sup> An Entente victory, despite the embarrassment of tsarist Russia as an ally, would entail the defeat of 'militarism'. These lofty ideals sat uneasily with more tangible political goals such as the restoration of Belgian independence and the defeat of the German navy.

From the very outset German actions were, to say the least, careless and reckless with regard to neutral opinion and enemy propaganda. The flagrant violation of Belgian neutrality made Germany an international pariah. The destruction of the mediaeval library at Louvain and the Cloth Hall at Ypres, the murder of Belgian civilians and the first large-scale use of poison gas in 1915 all outraged civilized opinion. Even where the line between humanitarian restraint and military necessity was blurred – as in the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* – a German firm presented a propaganda gift to their opponents by striking a vainglorious commemorative medal. British morale was continuously fuelled by moral outrage at enemy atrocities. Consequently, in John Bourne's striking summary, 'British public opinion camped throughout the war on the moral high ground, [and] Asquith pitched the first tent' with his rhetoric of fighting for principles 'vital to the civilisation of the world'.<sup>17</sup>

Although 'propaganda', in the sense of exploiting news to the full, sometimes without undue concern for strict accuracy, was employed by all sides and to an extent that may strike us now as disgraceful and nauseating, its importance as regards home morale must not be exaggerated. Propaganda could sustain morale by blackening the enemy's image and gilding one's own, but it could not create high

morale in the face of harsh realities such as poor working conditions and obvious military failures.

Indeed, contrary to earlier assumptions, we now have ample evidence that official efforts to mould public opinion, for example through censorship and propaganda of various kinds, were of marginal importance. Censorship of the press was inconsistent and astonishingly lax, but this hardly mattered given the press barons' conviction that newspapers had a duty to maintain civilian morale and support the army. This meant in practice that the mass circulation dailies did all they could to stress the justice of Britain's cause and, equally important, to deny a platform to individuals or groups who did not. Consequently, the press was consistently hostile to pacifists, conscientious objectors, strikers and any group deemed to be hindering the war effort. As a corollary, important sections of the press believed that it was the duty of politicians to give all possible support to the army and then stand back and allow the generals to win the war. This useful conduit was cleverly exploited by general headquarters (GHQ) in France, not always with scrupulous accuracy. Optimistic news from the front brought short-term benefits to morale at home but resulted later in a backlash against the concealment of painful truths and, worse, outright deception.

Beyond these considerations, we have to remember that in the pre-television age, the public's grasp of the nature of war was very defective. In fact 'a curtain of unreality descended between the war and the public perceptions of it'. Even the more popular newspapers made few concessions with their lofty style to the interests of mass culture, and war reporters were severely handicapped by military censorship and by the practical difficulties of witnessing front-line action. Unlike the French, the British had no official photographers or cameramen at the front until early 1916. Eventually there were sixteen photographers for all the war

theatres. Furthermore, most reporters were severely constrained by their own patriotic conception of their role, and by lack of an adequate style and vocabulary to convey the harsh realities of combat.<sup>18</sup> Here, we may suggest, modern critics such as Paul Fussell have a legitimate target in the gulf, which we now perceive as shocking, between 'the real war' and the sanitized, anodyne version presented to the public.

We must, however, avoid the trap of believing that two conflicting views of the war existed in British society between 1914 and 1918: the 'true view', stressing waste and horror, belonging to the fighting soldiers, and the 'false view', that of deluded civilian belief in patriotism and the nobility of sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> A corollary of this myth is that the government established such a firm control over all the news media that it was able to deceive the public into seeing the war in a false light. Nick Hiley has exploded these myths. The Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, for example, at the outset launched a big poster campaign, but this still represented less than 1 per cent of the commercial poster advertising budget in the normal year. Moreover, none of its posters were designed by government officials. Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence of any official involvement in the famous poster of Lord Kitchener carrying the slogan 'Your Country Needs You'. This and other posters represented a much larger set of patriotic images in general circulation. A similarly negative conclusion may be reached about official propaganda in the cinema. Although nearly 200 official films, including features, shorts and cartoons, were produced in the latter half of the war, this was still minuscule in comparison with commercial productions. At no time in the war, states Hiley, were as many cameramen employed in official filming as a single company would have used before 1914 to cover the Grand National. The Press Bureau's ability to shape

public opinion has also been greatly exaggerated: it was a small organization, totally reliant on newspaper support, primarily concerned with a select group of Fleet Street papers thought to be politically influential. In fact, far from tightening their grip on public opinion, official news media were swamped by sources quite outside official control. In any case, the Great War was largely conveyed to the public in pre-1914 imagery and concepts: 'only during the 1920s and 1930s was it re-fought using new images of waste and destruction developed during the conflict. It is this later re-evaluation that has come down to us as the true picture of British society during the Great War, but it is an historical absurdity'.<sup>20</sup>

Hiley's thesis is borne out by public reaction to the famous official film *The Battle of the Somme*, which drew enormous audiences when first shown in August 1916, that is, while the campaign was still in progress. Whereas contemporary viewers are apt to interpret the film as powerful evidence of the horror and futility of war, those at the time, assuming the cause to be just, seem to have been strengthened in their resolve to persevere to achieve victory. The film, by first showing dead British soldiers, as well as Germans, positively helped to give viewers some idea of what war was really like. Another official film, *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*, was also hugely popular, in part because it exploited the novelty of Britain's new wonder-weapon, the tank, but also because it vividly conveyed the dignity of ordinary soldiers doing their duty in a desolate battlescape. However, the next official war film, *The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras*, shown in June 1917, proved to be such a box-office failure that no more feature-length battle films were made during the war. The public's desertion of cinemas showing official war films was partly due to the government's understandable reluctance to show more footage of British dead and



wounded soldiers in appalling battlefield conditions, hence their reversion to anodyne scenes of cheerful Tommies relaxing and enjoying meals at ease in the rear areas. The War Office did, however, continue to produce short films, often dealing with more exotic aspects of the war, such as the campaigns in Palestine and Mesopotamia. A wider explanation must include the effects of growing hardship on ordinary people, who showed some signs of bitterness against the privileged classes as the war dragged on interminably. However, the dramatic German breakthrough and advance in March 1918 once again raised fears of defeat and caused the nation to rally against the enemy.<sup>21</sup>

Although numerous *individuals* wrote bitterly about their war experience and some evidently suffered from low morale, military morale in war time is essentially about the attitudes, cohesion and combat effectiveness of *groups*, ranging from the platoon and company right up to divisions, corps and armies. Scholarly consensus is that the British Army's morale remained high (or, at worst, steady), with the vast majority of soldiers displaying 'fighting spirit'. This was an impressive achievement for an overwhelmingly non-professional force which endured tremendous hardships and heavy casualties but continued to fight effectively.

The picture was not of course uniformly rosy, and there are known cases of battalions fleeing in disorder or being routed without putting up a fight, particularly on the Somme in 1916 and during the March retreat in 1918.<sup>22</sup> On the evidence mainly of censored letters, morale reached its lowest point during the later stages of the Passchendaele campaign in 1917, but even then there was no collective indiscipline comparable to the French mutinies a few months earlier. Indeed, the only serious example of indiscipline amounting to rebellion or mutiny *during the war* occurred at the notorious base training camp at Etaples in September 1917.<sup>23</sup> Here conditions were highly unusual:

experienced troops were treated like raw recruits, officers were separated from their men so that protective paternalism was lacking, and outrage was directed mainly at military police and NCO instructors. Without the 'creative tension' that existed at unit level between rigorous discipline and paternalism based on common pride in the battalion there would surely have been mutinies in the combat zone. The regular army's harsh disciplinary code is now much criticized but it was less resented then, given the severity of punishments in civil life.<sup>24</sup> Heavy losses in battle could cause morale to plummet for a short time, but rest, good food and above all minor but significant victories could have a prompt restorative effect. The British citizen soldiers were notorious grumblers and 'moaners' whose mood could fluctuate sharply. But their performance was rarely less than dogged. In their determination to defeat the Germans their morale reflected that of the nation-in-arms as a whole. Strong emotions of hatred of the enemy and lust for revenge must also be taken into account. Military and civilian morale were probably as high in November 1918 as at any point during the war. 'Trench warfare was a terrible experience, but the prospects of defeat at the hands of Germany were worse.'<sup>25</sup>

One famous subaltern and war poet who *did* briefly renounce the pull of comradeship, loyalty to his men and regimental tradition to stage a personal rebellion was Siegfried Sassoon. It is important to discuss this episode here because it contributed significantly to the post-war image of the war poets and their supposed anti-war stance.

Sassoon was a brave, competent and, at times, ferocious warrior serving with the Royal Welch Fusiliers. In June 1917 he invited a court martial and disgrace by denouncing the war as unjust in a statement to a Member of Parliament which then appeared in the press. In addition he resigned his commission and threw the ribbons of his Military Cross

into the river Mersey. The anti-climactic outcome of this courageous but foolhardy gesture is very well known thanks to recent coverage in a bestselling novel and the subsequent film.<sup>26</sup> Through the intervention of his friend and fellow-officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Robert Graves, Sassoon was treated as a shell-shock case and became a patient in Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh whence he later returned to duty at the front. Sassoon's own autobiographical writing reveals his confused state of mind and this is amplified in a recent biography.<sup>27</sup>

When Sassoon's endurance snapped his chief target was the ignorance and complacency of pro-war civilians. In diaries and letters he raged against profiteers, shirkers, clerics and especially women – including even war widows. He realized at the time that much of his bile was due to an unhealthy lifestyle in England: he would, he believed, be fitter and better in spirits once back with his battalion. Before that, however, he fell under the spell of Lady Ottoline Morrell and her Garsington circle. He was strongly influenced in particular by Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells, who persuaded him that the British government had spurned genuine German peace offers and was now waging a war of aggression. Although in his published statement Sassoon explicitly excluded the military conduct of the war from his protest, he was in fact very angry and depressed by the heavy losses his battalion had recently suffered, and feared that the war would eventually be lost after several more years of pointless bloodshed. The essence of his protest was as follows:

I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it

impossible for them to be changed without our knowledge, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now have been attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolonging those sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.<sup>28</sup>

Sassoon was a good officer and, at his best, an impressive poet, but in his rage and bitterness, due partly to personal hang-ups and partly to a natural reaction to conditions at the front and their misrepresentation at home, he lashed out blindly. Thus he composed a savage poem about General Rawlinson, calling him ‘the corpse commander’, and, with unintended irony, was inspired to write ‘The General’ by a glimpse of Sir Ivor Maxe, one of the best commanders on the Western Front.

But of course the main criticism to be made against his protest was that it was politically unacceptable and impractical. This he later acknowledged while not regretting his action:

I must add that in the light of the subsequent events it is difficult to believe that a Peace negotiated in 1917 would have been permanent. I share the general opinion that nothing on earth would have prevented a recurrence of Teutonic aggressiveness.<sup>29</sup>

No one can study the First World War, even superficially, without realizing that senior commanders and staff officers made numerous mistakes, particularly in renewing and prolonging offensives which had bogged down, thus contributing to the heavy loss of life – the main charge against them ever since. Even after ammunition and equipment became more plentiful, by mid-1916, and a learning process was clearly in being, operational progress was still patchy and earlier errors might be repeated.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless,

military historians deeply resent the tendency to dwell obsessively on the most obvious examples of failure – notably the first day of the Somme campaign in 1916 and the later stages of the Third Ypres offensive in 1917 – while showing little interest in, or appreciation of, the nation's unique and ultimately successful war effort over the whole period 1914–18. Changes in press policy also contributed to the neglect of the British Army's achievements in 1918. Haig's former supporters, Beaverbrook, Rothermere and Northcliffe, were now in, or associated with, the government and tended to adopt the Whitehall perspective. For their parts, Haig and general headquarters (GHQ) did little to win back press support. In consequence 'there was no policy or desire either in Whitehall or at GHQ . . . to publicise the British victories of later in the year'.<sup>31</sup>

A brief reference to the unexpected, rapid and enormous expansion of the army will help to explain why it took so long for Britain to compete effectively in full-scale continental warfare. The professional, and mostly-regular, BEF of 1914 consisted of only six lightly equipped divisions: by 1918 there were more than sixty British divisions on the Western Front alone, by now composed mainly of conscripts and numbering about two million men. The Royal Artillery became the dominant arm on the battlefield – an 'army within the army' of half a million gunners, that is, twice the size of the whole BEF in 1914. Few British generals had had any experience of high command (that is: a division or a corps) before 1914, and even for these few, conditions on the Western Front soon proved to be very different from the South African veldt. The Staff College at Camberley had produced only a few hundred trained staff officers – too few even to meet the initial needs of the War Office, the training depots and the BEF – let alone the vast expansion immediately signalled by the recruitment of the volunteer new armies in 1914–15. Not surprisingly this

largely improvised citizen army showed many deficiencies in the first two years of the war, notably at Loos, and was then prematurely obliged to take on the major offensive role from mid-1916 onwards.<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to popular myth the army was generally well led. Indeed, Sir John Keegan has suggested that British military leadership – ‘conscious, principled, exemplary’ – was of higher quality and significance in the First World War than before or since. Regimental officers lived close to their men and shared their privations and dangers to a considerable degree. Proportionately, junior officers suffered significantly higher casualties than the other ranks. The officer corps also changed in social composition in step with the vast expansion in the ranks. There were a substantial number of working-class and lower middle-class officers, so that ex-public schoolboys did not retain their early dominance, if only because so many were killed. In the middle and higher commands few ‘duds’ or incompetents survived; indeed many sound but insufficiently aggressive divisional and brigade commanders were sacked in the ruthless drive for efficiency. British staff officers in the First World War have had a bad press, from war poets speaking for disgruntled rankers and from later critics largely ignorant of the subject. We need only note here that in the operational staff of GHQ and higher formations many officers – such as Bernard Montgomery and John Dill – were former and future combat commanders, and that many were killed or wounded. They were comparatively few in number (only six to a division) and worked long hours under tremendous pressure. As for the ‘Q’ or administrative staff, it is fair to say that they did an excellent job in feeding, supplying, training and providing medical care for this vast army. In sum, this amateur force of citizens in uniform learned how to conduct modern industrial warfare in quite unexpected siege conditions against what

was surely the world's toughest and most tactically adept enemy, the imperial German army.<sup>33</sup>

Britain's unprecedented national war effort was widely appreciated in the hour of victory, as we should expect, since nearly every family in the land had contributed to it, but it was later to be downplayed and even forgotten as the disappointing results of the conflict were applied retrospectively to the war itself. In recent decades (as I shall discuss more fully in the final chapter) military historians have stressed the positive achievements of the 'nation in arms'<sup>34</sup> and, in the operational sphere, broadly accept the notion of a 'learning curve'. Indeed, with the odd exception such as Sir John Keegan, who rejects this endeavour,<sup>35</sup> the debate has moved on to specific issues, such as the origins of the process, the rapidity or 'steepness' of the curve, the levels at which lessons were implemented and who deserves the credit.

Unfortunately many critics who do not accept these interpretations are still metaphorically bogged down in the attrition battles of 1916 and 1917, and find it hard to come to terms with the culminating victorious advance of 1918 when British and imperial forces played the leading role in defeating the German armies on the Western Front.

As I remarked in my Liddell Hart Lecture in 1997:

Between 18 July and 11 November the British forces took 188, 700 prisoners and 2,840 guns, far more in each category than the French, Americans and Belgians. Following the brilliant operations in late September to break through the Hindenburg Line, the five British armies skilfully outmanoeuvred the stubborn defenders from a series of river and canal lines on which Ludendorff had hoped to stabilise the front during the winter.

Conditions did not permit a breakthrough and the advance to victory was steady rather than dramatic – about