*Chapter* I

# THE BRITISH TRADITION IN CONTINENTAL COALITIONS

## I

THE GREAT WAR, except for its unexampled magnitude, was a type with which British statesmen and soldiers were traditionally familiar. Once every century since the end of the sixteenth we had been engaged in a struggle to uphold what was idealistically called the freedom of Europe and more prosaically the balance of power. In each case England was directly touched by the spur of self-preservation, by the danger of a naval rivalry more or less intense, and by the threat of hostile dominion in the most precious outwork of her security, the Low Countries. In each case too she occupied within her membership of loose and often jarring continental coalitions a peculiar, indeed a unique, position. Her territory was never violated, her command of the sea gave an almost embarrassing choice of objectives for her campaigns, and a

semi-detached eclectic method of waging war. England in the past had never been the direct military instrument of the overthrow of the overmastering power against which the coalition was arranged. She had been the inspirer and the reviver of such coalitions, she had been consistently "the good milch cow" from which its members sucked subsidies inexhaustible in repute; she had in fact the tradition of waging continental war with the most lavish expenditure in money, and the greatest economy in human life. In the Napoleonic War, apart from the sums raised by taxation, some five hundred million pounds were added to the National Debt; but our loss of life scarcely exceeded 100,000 men or about an eighteenth of that of the French Empire.

In such circumstances England could afford to wait; for a prolonged war brought no dangerous drain of human material; the loss of money and dislocation of trade were in a long view far more than compensated by the acquisition of overseas territory, which gradually transformed the island kingdom into the world-circling empire. Such wars were indeed bound to be long wars, as in each case the dominating power, against which the coalition strove, was

both better prepared than its adversaries, and was able to use its lesser allies practically as the instruments of its own unfettered will. In consequence history went far to prove that British success in the great continental struggles was due, not to the adoption of any continental model of strategy, but to the deliberate maintenance of her own liberty of action. The alliances which she created or entered aimed rather at securing common political results than at waging war with any concerted unity of direction. This statement is no doubt less true of the War of the Spanish Succession than of the Napoleonic War, because Marlborough in the former was able to exercise a unique personal influence over the members of the coalition, as being both their foremost soldier and diplomatist.

Still, generally speaking, it is true that British influence over continental wars has not been to determine their strategy in the narrower sense, but rather their general course and character. And this is so just because in naval as opposed to military strategy we have maintained our choice and control practically unfettered.

Moreover, it will be the main thesis of these chapters to prove that in the years 1914–18 the

same generalisation in its broad lines holds good. Although, contrary to all earlier precedent, our contribution in men and our losses were on a scale comparable with, if not absolutely equal to, those of our principal allies and antagonists, yet our actual share in the determination of Allied strategy on land remained surprisingly small. On the other hand, it is profoundly true that our policy at sea alone enabled a great deal of that continental strategy to be put into force at all.

II

At this point it is well to stop and ask whether it is not begging the question to speak of Allied strategy at all in the late war. Would it not be more accurate to speak of a partial and incomplete co-ordination of separate efforts? This is of course perfectly true. It is a defect to a certain degree inevitable in every coalition, but particularly in the Entente where at least three powers, the British Empire, France and Russia, could justly claim a position of complete equality. The strategy of a coalition will always consist to a large extent in badly synchronised compromises, and can never hope to rival in efficiency

a single direction, or even a single preponderating will. "After all Napoleon was not such a great general, he only had to fight against coalitions." Such was the outburst of General Sarrail at Salonika when, in command of the armies of five nations, he was contending in miniature against all the political and military divergencies of the countries represented.

But if all this is admitted, it would be unfair to deny that a closer co-operation was actually achieved between the members of the Entente than between the members of any earlier comparable coalition. This may be explained by three reasons:

(i) All its members did sincerely desire the same thing, "the destruction of the military domination of Germany", to use the familiar words so often in the mouths of war-time statesmen.

(ii) The geographical position of the Entente, which as the Germans so bitterly insisted had been exploited for their *Einkreisung* in the previous decade, dictated naturally a convergent form of siege pressure. Such a concentric attack on Russia or on France under the conditions of the modern world is almost impossible. On the

other hand the geographical setting of Russia condemned her to practical isolation.

(iii) The Great War was the first of its kind in which all information on all fronts was—at least in its broad outlines—available for everyone practically simultaneously. It was therefore possible to arrange for the synchronisation and succession of blows in accordance with mutual need. Every move on the chess-board could be made in reliance on up-to-date information. A century ago, however anxious a statesman or general might be to help, he was bound to hesitate before acting on stale news, one, two or three months out-of-date. A study of Wellington's campaign in France, 1813–14, shows how enormously he was hampered by the slow percolation of news from the German theatre. The Russians in particular between 1914 and 1916 showed an extraordinary readiness to stage "relief offensives" at a moment's notice. The very fact of their improvisation, however, made them almost always sadly ineffective and costly. Moreover, except for the Russians, all the great chiefs of the Entente, civil and military, could meet at almost a day's notice to discuss their mutual problems, and to pool their experiences.

Allied strategy then must be understood as a loose and approximate but far from meaningless term. Even among the Central Powers there were many divergencies from the strict ideal of centralised effort; indeed the rift between Falkenhayn and Conrad in the winter of 1915–16 cut deeper than that between any two chiefs of the Entente, and barely missed the most disastrous consequences.

So the British influence will be considered in proportion to its share in shaping or co-ordinating the Allied effort, and in relation to the strategy of one or more members of the Entente. It is indeed obvious that at any given moment these two points may be entirely distinct. For example, in 1916 a plan was made for co-ordinating all the offensives of the Entente, French, British, Russian and Italian. There was also at the same time the wholly Franco-British problem of the correct strategy to be employed in the projected attack in France.

## III

It is hard to define the role of strategy in modern war, to decide the limits wherein it begins and ends. War is no longer in essence an act of policy,

"a continuation of policy by other means", but a supreme effort to break the resistance of the whole enemy population. As Hindenburg truly said, "the side with the best nerves will win". Every kind of measure, whatever its political, financial or economic consequences, may be justified on military grounds alone as essential for winning the war. Briand might well complain that "modern war is too serious a business to be entrusted to soldiers". But the monstrous paradox remains true that the more important the war, the less say the responsible statesmen among the belligerents are likely to have in waging it. In Germany the victory of strategy as determined by soldiers over policy was almost absolute. The invasion of Belgium demanded by the Schlieffen plan made certain the very result that the statesmen most dreaded, the immediate entry of England. The plan of mobilisation had been so drawn up without any alternative scheme that, however anxious France might have been to evade her treaty commitments with Russia, Germany would have been forced instantly to declare war upon her. As everyone knows the unrestricted submarine campaign was forced through by the general staff in spite of Bethmann-

Hollweg's resistance, who foresaw the consequences of provoking the United States beyond remedy. Conversely, an official pronouncement of the unqualified readiness of Germany to give up Belgium was vetoed by the military and naval experts, who declared that it was necessary to retain large portions of it. Yet such a statement would have gone farther to weaken England's war will and to forward the opening of negotiations than anything else. Nor was this unrecognised by the successive Chancellors, who nevertheless sealed their lips. It needed indeed but a word from the High Command to overthrow them.

It is clear that the Germans, sentimental, submissive, hierarchical and desperate, welcomed the almost absolute and all-embracing domination of strategy.

It would, however, be quite untrue to suggest that either in England or France such or even analogous conditions prevailed.

On the contrary the statesmen of both countries were as a rule resolute in refusing a military demand, the consequences of which they considered politically disastrous or immoral. For example, the vehement demands that cotton

should be placed at once on the list of absolute contraband was delayed until it was certain that such an action would not cause a breach with the United States. Dutch neutrality was not violated in order to use the Scheldt for the help of the beleaguered garrison at Antwerp. It is perhaps only in the treatment of Greece and Persia that the civil authorities bowed to military pressure against their own better judgment. The terms of alliance offered as an inducement to Italy and Rumania, which were in many respects contradictory to the principles for which the Allies declared themselves to be fighting, were of course prompted by assumed military necessity, but those who negotiated them took full responsibility for their actions. They cannot be considered as in any way due to the dictation of professional soldiers. Both had in fact consequences which at least some professional soldiers foresaw and deplored.

If, then, we may allow that the British Cabinet, with which we are primarily concerned, maintained its ascendancy in the sphere which most properly belonged to it, it remains to consider to what extent it could influence the course of strategy proper.