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CHAPTER I

PRINCIPLES

A PRELIMINARY point of principle which confronts us at the outset is whether the whole of the control of war should not be delegated by the Government to the military authorities; in other words, whether a war should be controlled by statesmen or solely by fighting men.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL OR MILITARY CONTROL?

It was sometimes argued in the last war that as war is a matter of fighting, the proper method for its control is to choose the best possible military leaders and to leave the whole business to them.

That is a short-sighted view. It is, of course, true that the actual victory is brought about by the application of force. But the conduct of operations by sea, land or air is a very technical business, which requires the whole of the energies both of the General Staffs at home and of the leaders in the various theatres of war. Those leaders can only carry it out effectively if their forces are properly equipped and supplied, and on the assumption that all the material and moral resources of the nation are organised behind them. To do that the military leaders have neither the knowledge nor the time.

Very occasionally, it is true, a military leader has been thrown up who had the capacity to fulfil the dual role. Such was the Duke of Marlborough, who—to quote the Master of Trinity—'acted as the head of the State in war-time for all military and diplomatic affairs, but he left to his colleagues the management of Parliament'.* Such a one also was Napoleon, who combined military, political and administrative gifts in a marked degree. But it was too big a job, even for Napoleon. In the long run he

* G. M. Trevelyan, *History of England*, p. 510.

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over-reached himself, bled his country white, failed to appreciate sea power, made a gigantic mistake in under-rating the intrinsic strength of Russia, and brought his country down with a crash. If the job was too big for Napoleon, it is infinitely larger to-day owing to the huge increase in populations and fighting forces and the complexity of modern life and Government. One of Hitler's greatest mistakes has been his attempt to combine control of the German war effort with constant interference with operations, e.g. at Stalingrad, the Falaise 'pocket' in Normandy, and on many other occasions. His country, too, is about to crash.

In a country like our own, governed by a Parliamentary system, however, the arguments against military control are overwhelming.

Under the King the country is governed by a Parliament elected by the people, and the House of Commons has the responsibility of voting or refusing supplies. Whether in peace or war the Government of the day, composed (with rare exceptions in times of war) of members of one or other House of Parliament supporting the party or combination of parties possessing a majority in the House of Commons, has to persuade Parliament, and especially the House of Commons, that its policy is right so that supplies will be voted. That is a highly technical business involving an intimate grasp of the whole machinery of Government, for which no professional sailor, soldier or airman is trained, or would care, to undertake responsibility. Indeed, after the last war Sir William Robertson went so far as to express the considered opinion that 'war is not so much a matter for soldiers and sailors as soldiers and sailors sometimes think', and even that—

> The war afforded no confirmation of the view sometimes expressed that the War Minister ought to be a professional soldier.*

* *Soldiers and Statesmen*, vol. I, p. 189.

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THE GOVERNMENT AND STRATEGY

Of course, in the grand strategy of the war the views of the Service Chiefs must usually prevail. Even in this field, however, the last word must rest with the statesmen who are responsible for policy. They alone have full knowledge of the resources of the nation or alliance of nations at any given moment, and of the probable reaction of this or that operation on hesitant neutral nations. It is they who have to distribute the resources of their country in the manner best calculated to win the war. That is often a difficult matter to decide and mistakes can easily be made. If too much is allotted to the Navy, there may be too little left for the Army and the Air Force and *vice versa*. In the last and in the present war, for example, when at first we were preoccupied with the expansion of the Army and its supplies which, at the outset of both wars, were totally inadequate to our needs, our shipping tonnage was allowed to fall to a dangerous level before the proper remedies were applied. The result was that in both wars our greatest danger of failure came in that very element in which we can never afford to take risks—the sea.

RELATIONS WITH COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF

In the actual theatres of war the general principle is that, having selected the best men available as Commanders-in-Chief, the Government should give them a free hand and back them up to the hilt with a minimum of interference. That principle should rarely be departed from.

There are occasions, however, when the statesmen are bound to step in. If, for example, the strategy of a Commander-in-Chief involves such a drain on the total resources of the State, Empire or Alliance as to imperil the staying power of the nations concerned, or the conduct of some equally essential operation elsewhere, the Governments concerned may have to intervene.

That was the basis of the difficulties that arose in 1917–18 between Mr Lloyd George and his Generals. After the most

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exhaustive examination he and some of his colleagues were unconvinced by Generals Haig and Robertson that the Flanders operation offered a reasonable prospect of success, and they apprehended that the result must bleed the man-power of the nation white before the United States of America could bring their strength to bear on a sufficient scale to redress the balance. They put up counter-proposals for examination by the General Staff and the High Command in the field. But these were rejected for technical reasons that they could not over-rule, and they realised that, as a matter of principle, it is inadvisable to order Generals to undertake operations in which they do not believe—another of Hitler's worst mistakes, by the way. Somewhat reluctantly, then, they had to give way. As Mr Lloyd George says in his summing-up of this episode—'The fighting of a battle is mainly a decision for the Generals.'* In the result, the Flanders operations followed the course that Mr Lloyd George had predicted; the man-power of the country was reduced so gravely that in the early months of 1918 the essential needs of the ship-building necessary to bring American forces and of other supply and transport services for maintaining the war effort could only be met at the expense of the Army. There followed the grave reverses of March 1918.

The merits of that controversy will not be argued here, because it is a very complicated matter and there is much to be said on both sides. It is only mentioned to illustrate the difficulties in allotting the national resources that may confront Governments, especially in the later stages of a war.

Another reason which may compel intervention by Governments in plans or operations is in the event of a difference of opinion either between the three Fighting Services, or, as more often happens, between the military authorities of the different nations forming an Alliance.

In the last war, for example, there were serious differences of opinion between the British and French military authorities on

* *War Memoirs*, vol. VI, p. 3416.

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such matters as the extent of the line to be held by the British Army in France; the maintenance of armies in the Balkans and other so-called 'side-shows'; the command and distribution of naval forces in the Mediterranean (1918); and the establishment of an independent Air Force in 1918. The only way to settle these matters was for the heads of the two Governments to step in.

GERMAN EXPERIENCE

It used to be argued early in the last war that the successes of the Central Powers in the first four years were due to the ascendancy of the military authorities in Germany.

Theoretically the last word rested with the Kaiser, who however seems usually to have given his decision in favour of his military advisers when there was a clash between them and the civilian Ministers—as in the case of the submarine war on shipping. It is clear, however, from the Memoirs of the German leaders that the military authorities did not actually control the civil Government. Ludendorff is always inveighing against the fact that he could not do so, and complained bitterly of the friction that arose in consequence. For example:

> G.H.Q. and the Chancellor had equal status. Here, too, the common head was the Emperor. Our dealings with the Imperial Government were frequent, and not too pleasant. We did not meet with that spirit of accommodation which was so necessary when we told the Government what the successful prosecution of the war demanded of them, if the German people were to be rendered capable of victory.
>
> The representation of military interests in all questions of foreign policy during the war and in connection with the conclusion of peace meant frequent dealings, and much friction also.
>
> The machinery of Government in Berlin gave the impression of being extremely clumsy.
>
> The various departments worked side by side without any real sympathy or cohesion, and there was infinite 'over-lapping'. The left hand often did not know what the right was doing. A Bismarck could have made these departments co-operate properly, but the task was beyond our War Chancellors.*

* Ludendorff, *My War Memories*, vol. 1, p. 263.

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In another passage Ludendorff goes on to compare the German system unfavourably with the British:

> Like Clemenceau and Lloyd George I had wanted to call on the whole nation, but I was not a dictator, as men were only too glad to repeat, false though it was. Lloyd George and Clemenceau had the control of their Parliaments, for these were 'their' Parliaments. At the same time, they stood at the heads of the entire administrative and executive authorities; I, on the other hand, had no constitutional power to influence the German Government in order to enforce my views as to the steps necessary for the conduct of the war, and I was frequently confronted with the lack of understanding and energy of the departments concerned.*

Prince Max of Baden, writing from the civilian side, is no less critical of the German system:

> But Particularism lurks like an inborn curse in the German character, and before the war—and above all, during the war—had taken refuge in the Departments—among the Admirals, among the Generals, among the diplomats. They had no spirit of mutual trust, and seldom worked together as allies in a common cause, as the welfare of the nation required of them.†

From this and other testimony by our enemy we may conclude that the German system was nothing to boast about. Indeed, between the two wars I had it direct more than once from German officials that it was unsatisfactory both in peace and war. When they asked me how team-work and loyalty between Ministers, Military Staffs and Civil Servants had been accomplished in this country, I replied by telling the old story of the American visitor to Cambridge, who asked the gardener of one of the Colleges how the flawless grass in the Court had been achieved, and received the reply: 'By mowin' and rollin' and rollin' and mowin' for about three hundred years.' It was by some such process that our system of Cabinet Government had been evolved, I added—an answer which was considered discouraging!

* Ludendorff, *My War Memories*, vol. II, pp. 706–7.
† *The Memoirs of Prince Max of Baden*, vol. II, p. 285.

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For the above reasons we can, I think, accept the proposition that under modern conditions the War Control must rest in the hands of statesmen, working, of course, in the closest co-operation with the Service Chiefs.

THE PRIME MINISTER'S RESPONSIBILITY

The Prime Minister must play the leading part. As the late Lord Morley (then Mr Morley) puts it in his *Life of Walpole*:

> The Prime Minister is the keystone of the Cabinet arch. Although in Cabinet all its members stand on an equal footing, speak with equal voice, and, on the rare occasions when a division is taken, are counted on the fraternal system of one man, one vote, yet the head of the Cabinet is *primus inter pares*, and occupies a position which, so long as it lasts, is one of exceptional and peculiar authority.*

In fact John Morley went further and claimed that

> The flexibility of the Cabinet system allows the Prime Minister in an emergency to take upon himself a power not inferior to that of a dictator, provided always that the House of Commons will stand by him.†

The truth of that statement is illustrated by the paramount position established by Mr Lloyd George in the last war and by Mr Churchill in the present war.

To tell the truth, though, the job is no bed of roses. 'No English Minister can ever wish for war', says Lord Rosebery in his *Life of Pitt*:

> He can reap little glory from success; he is the first scapegoat of failure. He too has to face, not the heroic excitement of the field, but domestic misery and discontent; the heavy burden of taxation, and the unpopularity of the sacrifice which all war entails.‡

Lord Rosebery also warns the war-time Prime Minister against 'that strange bias which has made some eminent statesmen believe themselves to be eminent generals', from which he exonerates Mr Pitt, adding, however, that 'he had the consciousness of a boundless capacity for meeting the real requirements of the

* Chapter VII, p. 157. † *Ibid.* p. 158. ‡ *Ibid.* p. 117.

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country'. I believe consciousness of capacity, rather than personal ambition, is often the real underlying motive which has usually thrown up the right man to lead the Government Control in our great war emergencies.

Apart from his being the 'keystone of the Cabinet arch', there are other reasons why the Prime Minister of the day must be the head of the Government Control. One of the principal responsibilities of the office in peace or war is to expound the main policy of the Government to Parliament, and through Parliament and otherwise—for example, by the broadcast—to the people. In a major war the main policy of the Government is necessarily its conduct. To expound it the Prime Minister must be intimately conversant with all its aspects. The threads must all be in his hands, and that can never be the case unless he is responsible for the day-to-day running of the war. It is not necessary, of course, that the Prime Minister should be burdened with all statements on behalf of the Government, and in December 1916, Mr Lloyd George established a wise precedent, which Mr Churchill has followed in the present war, of delegating the day-to-day leadership of the House of Commons to a colleague.

Another reason is that, from the nature of his office, the Prime Minister has a prestige unequalled among Ministers. Disputes between Departments and their Ministerial Heads are bound to arise, and quite legitimately—for example, on questions of priority, especially in the later stages of a war when resources are strained. Although there are many disputes in which the decision of an unbiased colleague will be accepted by the parties, others arise of such importance that only the Prime Minister's decision will be final. He alone 'carries the guns', and even he will not be able to give right decisions unless he has all the threads of war policy in his hands.

It will be remembered that during the Cabinet crisis of December 1916, which centred in the system of Government Control, Mr Lloyd George proposed that there should be a small War Committee under his own chairmanship which, subject to

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the authority of the Prime Minister and his discretion to refer any matter to the Cabinet, should undertake the day-to-day direction of the war. That scheme broke down owing to Mr Asquith's insistence that

> whatever changes are made in the composition or functions of the War Committee, the Prime Minister must be its Chairman. He cannot be relegated to the position of an arbiter in the background or a referee to the Cabinet.*

The system that Mr Asquith rejected had been tried in the Newcastle-Pitt administration of 1757, of which it was said that 'Mr Pitt *does* everything, and the Duke of Newcastle *gives* everything'. Although, so far as the Seven Years' War was concerned, that experiment, in spite of some failures, produced great results, it is very understandable that Mr Asquith was unwilling to play the part of Newcastle to Mr Lloyd George's Pitt.

All the evidence therefore points to one conclusion, namely, that the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister alone, must be the head of the Government Control in time of war.

THE PRIME MINISTER AND WAR PREPARATION

Our Prime Ministers, who have had to force their way to the top through the hurly-burly of political life, have nearly always been men of strong character and adaptability to handle crises of every sort and kind. But until the present century at any rate they have rarely had the opportunity to study the problems of wars with which they may be confronted, and that may have some bearing on the fact that our preparations have never been adequate to the emergency when it arose.

Our foreign policy is always and necessarily one of peace, since to a country dependent for its existence on imports of food and raw material, which have to be paid for by exports and invisible exports, peace is the first essential.

* J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, *Life of Lord Oxford and Asquith*, vol. II, chapter L, pp. 252–3.

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For centuries there was a tendency to trust to principles of peace, of neutrality and of diplomacy as a substitute for war preparation. The risk that war may break out for reasons beyond our control and that our existence may be put in jeopardy has only too often been overlooked.

Thus we see the younger Pitt, bent on a policy of peace, prosperity and reform, ignoring the French Revolution up to the last moment and declaring in February 1792, just a year before the outbreak of the long war of the French Revolution and Empire, that

> Unquestionably there never was a time in the history of this country when from the situation of Europe we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace than at the present moment.*

And again, more than a century later, we see successive British Governments of different parties adopting an equally complaisant attitude, assuming no major war for ten years† and 'taking risks for peace' up to 1935.‡

How are we to provide against a repetition of those risks? How are we to ensure that in peaceful years a succession of Prime Ministers and other Ministers are sufficiently versed in the business of warfare to be ready to take charge of its direction at short notice? How are we to avoid again being caught napping?

That subject is discussed further in a later chapter, but one essential principle can be stated here and now, namely, that the Prime Minister should always be responsible for the general direction of our preparations for war.

In a sentence, the same considerations which compel the Prime Minister of the day to take charge of the control and direction of war must apply in peace to preparation for war. In addition, what applies to the Prime Minister, on whom so great a burden may suddenly fall in the event of war, must apply to his principal

* Rosebery, *Pitt*, chapter VII, p. 121.
† House of Lords debates, e.g. 7th March 1935.
‡ White Paper on Defence, March 1935. Cmd. 4827/35.

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