

Part I The Military and Political Context

1 INTERWAR

Materiel and Manpower

The story must begin in the interwar years. Much, indeed, depends on an evaluation of the preparedness of Britain, the Commonwealth and its armies during this period. The balance drawn between ‘structure’, what seems likely given underlying trends, and ‘contingency’, ‘those unpredicted and unpredictable historical accidents that can still have profound consequences’, drives much of our understanding of the past.¹ It can also inform the manner in which preparations are made for the future. It is important, in short, to understand those areas where the British and Commonwealth Armies were in decline in the interwar years and recognise where, quite frankly, they were not.²

The extent of British and Commonwealth military power during these critical years was a reflection first and foremost of Britain’s economic, geopolitical and demographic strengths. Britain provided the vast majority of the funding for the interwar British and Commonwealth Armies and just about all of their equipment. For example, in the financial year 1937/8, Britain spent £265.2 million on defence, while India spent £34.5 million, Canada £7.2 million, Australia £6 million, South Africa £1.7 million and New Zealand £1.6 million.³ The UK provided ‘90% of imperial munitions to the end of 1940, a proportion that remained above 60% even after the USA entered the war’.⁴

In terms of military power, Britain remained close to peerless during most of this period.⁵ ‘No other great power could match its combination of military (mainly naval) and economic strength or its latent ability to coerce its enemies’.⁶ Despite the rise of American power, ‘it was still widely thought that Britain held the “central place” in the world economy’. She was the world’s greatest trader and investor, with the most diverse portfolio and the largest business network. In geopolitical terms, she commanded an intermediate position between Continental Eurasia and the Outer World.

To be wholly in the Outer World (like the United States) without purchase in Eurasia, was to risk commercial exclusion from the wealthiest and most populated parts of the globe. Without an influence in Continental politics, an Outer power might find the Old World unified against it, driving it into defensive isolation, or threatening it with encirclement and attrition. A purely Continental power, by contrast, was forced into constant territorial rivalry. Its frontiers were always at risk. The fixed costs of its defence were always high. Access to the Outer World was always in doubt. The scope for political and economic freedom was narrow, impeding its economic and social development. But the intermediate power – Britain – had the best of both worlds. It was less exposed to territorial friction. It was hard to isolate and even harder to encircle. It could draw on the products of the Outer World and deny them to the Continent. And, with a modicum of luck or skill, it could ensure that no Continental combination could be formed against it – or, if formed, last long.⁷

Britain was the world’s first fully industrialised and urban society. She had the largest global empire the world had ever seen, controlling just under a quarter of the world’s land mass, and a similar proportion of the world’s population, and she had alliances with other powerful states. In 1939, the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of the British and French empires exceeded that of Germany and Italy by 60 per cent.⁸ The *Economist* wrote, in September 1939, that Britain, along with her allies, had similar white populations to Germany and Italy, large colonial populations, double the coal and motor-car production and more than three times the merchant shipping and iron-ore production of Germany.⁹

Contrary to the popular perception that Britain disarmed after the First World War,¹⁰ defence expenditure in the United Kingdom ‘stabilised after 1923, even rising in some years and, measured as a percentage of GDP, was not much lower between 1923/4 and 1927/8 than between 1906/7 and 1913/14’. A retrenchment took place during the Depression, but even then, defence spending as a proportion of GDP only fell from 2.9 per cent in 1927/8 to 2.7 per cent in 1930/1. It remained stable at 2.8 per cent between 1931/2 and 1934/5 and then started to grow steadily as Britain gradually rearmed from 1935 onwards.¹¹

As national currencies ‘were not convertible or stable in value in the 1930s’, it is not possible to present a truly accurate picture of British defence expenditure in comparison to its main competitors during this period. Nevertheless, it is feasible to trace defence spending in each national currency, thus giving a sense of ‘the rate and scale of change in competitive arms expenditure’.¹² As demonstrated in Table 1.1,¹³ from the onset of the international crisis instigated by Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Britain increased its defence expenditure by a factor of twenty-four. By comparison, Germany increased its spending by a multiple of seventy-five; but Germany started from a lower base. The French War Ministry, for example, estimated that Britain (not including the Empire) spent 15.4 billion francs on defence in 1928 compared to the Germans who spent 4.3, barely 28 per cent of the British total.¹⁴ By 1938, French intelligence noted that the only state to exceed British rearmament expenditure was Nazi Germany and, if one added military spending in the Dominions, ‘The British empire already ha[d] the largest defence budget in the world.’¹⁵

Within this context, the British Army ranked second in spending priorities for almost all of the interwar years, its key role in defending the Empire surpassed by the Royal Navy’s responsibility for home defence (see Table 1.2).¹⁶ With the end of the First World War, spending on the Army, like in the other two services, had decreased. On 15 August 1919, the War Cabinet decided that it should be assumed that the British Empire would ‘not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years’ (the Ten Year Rule); thus, whereas expenditure on the Army towards the end of the First World War (1918/19) had been £974 million, in 1921/2 it was £95.1 million and by 1922/3 it was £45.4 million. Spending stabilised around this mark for much of the 1920s and by 1927/8 was still £44.15 million (in a period when prices

Table 1.1 Defence expenditure of the Great Powers, 1931-40 (in millions in each national currency)

| Year | Britain (pounds sterling) | France (francs) | Germany (reichsmark) | Italy (lire) | Soviet Union (ruble) | United States (dollars) | Japan (yen) |
|------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| 1931 | 107.5 | 13,852 | 610 | 5,034 | 1,790 | 733 | 434 |
| 1932 | 103.3 | 13,814 | 720 | 5,049 | 4,034 | 703 | 733 |
| 1933 | 107.6 | 13,431 | 750 | 4,575 | 4,299 | 648 | 873 |
| 1934 | 113.9 | 11,601 | 4,093 | 5,317 | 5,393 | 540 | 955 |
| 1935 | 137.0 | 12,800 | 5,492 | 12,108 | 8,174 | 711 | 1,032 |
| 1936 | 185.9 | 15,101 | 10,271 | 13,078 | 14,858 | 914 | 1,105 |
| 1937 | 256.3 | 21,580 | 10,963 | 12,282 | 17,481 | 937 | 3,953 |
| 1938 | 397.4 | 29,153 | 17,247 | 13,446 | 23,200 | 1,030 | 6,097 |
| 1939 | 719.0 | 93,687 | 38,000 | 24,689 | 39,200 | 1,075 | 6,417 |
| 1940 | 2,600.0 | | 55,900 | 63,235 | 56,752 | 1,498 | 7,266 |

were stable or falling). It was only in 1928/9 that there was a reduction in Army expenditure to £40.5 million, when Winston Churchill, who was Chancellor, succeeded in persuading the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) to implement the Ten Year Rule on a rolling basis.¹⁷

This new arrangement was to be reviewed each year and was not, Churchill intended, to hamper the development of ideas but to hold back mass production until the situation required it, a challenge and consideration well understood by the Army itself. The Army was, therefore, 'free to experiment' with new weapons and make use of the large stocks of equipment left over from the First World War.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the financial crisis arising from the Great Depression led to further reductions and Army expenditure reached its interwar nadir of £35.9 million in 1932/3. By then, however, with the international political situation deteriorating, the Cabinet cancelled the assumption that there would be no major war for ten years.¹⁹ In 1934, the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC) of the CID identified Germany as Britain's 'ultimate' potential enemy and recommended a programme for dealing with what were described as 'the worst deficiencies' in the armed forces. A Continental expeditionary force consisting of five mechanised divisions supported by fourteen infantry divisions drawn from the Territorial Army (TA) was recommended. Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, accepted that it was essential to have an expeditionary force to keep Germany out of the Low Countries, but he did not believe that Germany would be ready for war in the five-year period being considered by the DRC, and recommended that the Army's programme be spread over a longer period.²⁰ Subsequent DRC reports again stressed the need to build up the Army, but recognition that 'industry could not fulfil the whole programme without a semi-war organisation to overcome bottlenecks, principally shortages of skilled labour and machine tools', encouraged the Treasury and the Government to prioritise the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a deterrent to German aggression.²¹

In spite of these challenges, the Army's budget bounced back to £44.6 million in 1935/6.²² The Cabinet approved formal rearmament in February 1936 and thereafter matters began to develop at pace. Army expenditure for 1936/7 was £54.8 million, in 1937/8 it was £77.8 million. With the German occupation of Austria in March 1938, the Government gave full priority to rearmament and that year (1938/9) spending came to £121.4 million. Once it was clear

that appeasement and the Munich agreement had failed, the foot was fully taken off the brakes and, on 22 February 1939, the Cabinet approved plans to raise a regular expeditionary force of four infantry and two armoured divisions with an immediate reserve of four TA divisions. After four years of prevarication, the original DRC recommendation had finally been put into action and, on 29 March, the Cabinet signed off on the doubling of the TA from thirteen to twenty-six divisions. It then, on 19 April, approved a plan to increase industrial capacity and reserves of equipment for a thirty-two-division force to be in the field twelve months after the outbreak of war. In 1939/40 expenditure on the Army rose to £242.4 million and by now 'the problem was no longer the availability of finance' (Army expenditure had risen sixfold in the space of five years), but rather how fast this new army could be trained and 'the speed with which industrial capacity could be brought on stream to allow all the money it had been allocated to be spent'.²³

Defence expenditure elsewhere in the Commonwealth broadly mirrored the trend set in Britain but was not comparable in terms of scale to that of the United Kingdom.²⁴ In the financial year 1937/8, for example, 'when crucial decisions were being taken in London as to the relative importance of imperial defence and support on land for European allies', Britain spent about 5.6 per cent of its national income on defence, compared to about 1 per cent in Canada, 1 per cent in Australia, 0.8 per cent in New Zealand and 0.4 per cent in South Africa.²⁵ As a proportion of its central government revenue, India spent about twice as much on defence as Britain (57 per cent, as opposed to 27 per cent), but this expenditure was insufficient to 'modernize the Indian army to European standards'. The British Government, as a result, decided in December 1933, to make an annual contribution of £1.5 million to Indian defence. It increased this figure to £2 million in 1938, with an additional contribution of £5 million towards creating a fully modernised Imperial Reserve Division. It eventually agreed, in 1939, to pay £34 million for a wider modernisation of the Indian Army and, with nearly a third of the British Army stationed in India at any one time (on internal security duties), it can certainly be argued that Indian defence relied significantly 'on British military resources'.²⁶

Britain was, therefore, by 1938/9 in a better position with regards to military expenditure than critics sometimes suggest. The decision to ramp up spending and expand the Army had been left late (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2), but the logic of British strategy appeared

Table 1.2 Expenditure by the defence departments and Army share of total defence expenditure, 1924/5 to 1939/40

| Financial year | RAF | Army | Navy | Total | Army as % of total |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|
| 1924/5 | 14,310 | 44,765 | 55,625 | 114,700 | 39% |
| 1925/6 | 15,470 | 44,250 | 59,657 | 119,377 | 37% |
| 1926/7 | 15,530 | 43,600 | 57,600 | 116,730 | 37% |
| 1927/8 | 15,150 | 44,150 | 58,140 | 117,440 | 38% |
| 1928/9 | 16,050 | 40,500 | 56,920 | 113,470 | 36% |
| 1929/30 | 16,750 | 40,500 | 55,750 | 113,000 | 36% |
| 1930/1 | 17,800 | 40,150 | 52,574 | 110,524 | 36% |
| 1931/2 | 17,700 | 38,520 | 51,060 | 107,280 | 36% |
| 1932/3 | 17,100 | 35,880 | 50,010 | 102,990 | 35% |
| 1933/4 | 16,780 | 37,592 | 53,500 | 107,872 | 35% |
| 1934/5 | 17,630 | 39,660 | 56,580 | 113,870 | 35% |
| 1935/6 | 27,496 | 44,647 | 64,806 | 136,949 | 33% |
| 1936/7 | 50,134 | 54,848 | 81,092 | 186,074 | 29% |
| 1937/8 | 82,290 | 77,877 | 101,950 | 262,117 | 30% |
| 1938/9 | 133,800 | 121,361 | 127,295 | 382,456 | 32% |
| 1939/40 | 294,834 | 242,438 | 181,771 | 719,043 | 34% |

sound; France would hold the line on the Continent, providing time for Britain to build up its strength, mobilise its economy, and train its new army. In the interim, the Royal Navy and RAF would play a dominant role in a Continental conflagration by devastating Germany through blockade and aerial bombardment.²⁷ The Army was, nevertheless, weaker in terms of materiel than it would ideally have wished, as it took time to build up production from a low base.²⁸ By September 1939, the Germans had already built 3,890 armoured vehicles; by comparison the British had 146.²⁹ The regular divisions sent to France in September 1939 were short of vital specialist weapons, ammunition, spare parts and communications equipment.³⁰ But, Britain and France were catching up fast. In the first half of 1940, the combined Anglo-French production of tanks was 1,412, compared to German production of 558. Between January and May 1940, Anglo-French aircraft production was twice the German production rate.³¹ As the Cabinet Secretary remarked as early as December 1938, ‘there was nothing much wrong with the scale of Britain’s preparations, but “I wish we had started rearming a year earlier”’.³² In sum, a ‘consensus’

has emerged that Anglo-French forces, on a material calculation alone, were sufficiently well equipped to avoid defeat and disaster.³³

In terms of manpower, the British Army was weak, however, certainly in terms of numbers. Whereas the German Army had expanded fivefold between 1932 and 1938, aided considerably by the introduction of conscription in March 1935,³⁴ numbers in the regular British Army remained static at around 200,000.³⁵ The TA, a force of part-time volunteer soldiers, the embodiment of Britain's amateur military tradition and long-time distrust of large standing armies, numbered around 130,000.³⁶ In June 1938, the Regular Army still stood at 197,000, with the TA providing an additional 186,421. Little had changed by June 1939, the British Army, regular and territorial, numbering in the region of 400,000 men. However, by the end of August 1939, with the introduction of conscription in April/May (the first time Britain imposed compulsory military service in peacetime), the call-up of the reserves and the doubling of the TA, the Army had over 700,000 men under arms, in training or carrying out full-time administrative duties.³⁷ After the declaration of war, the Army could also rely on the manpower of the Raj and the Dominions. Thus, by September 1939, the British and Commonwealth Armies combined numbered over 1.1 million men,³⁸ compared to a German Army more than three times that size (3.7 million).³⁹ Britain was, however, allied with France who had by 1939 armed forces numbering about 5 million.⁴⁰

The speed of expansion of the Army had clearly left it vulnerable, the new forces and weapons at its disposal could not be turned into an effective fighting force overnight. But these deficiencies were offset to a significant degree by other factors, one of which was the quality of its commanders. By the start of the Second World War, the leadership of the British Army, in spite of the many criticisms it has since received,⁴¹ was, by any standards, modern, highly professional and had, irrespective of the vacillation of its political masters, been thinking seriously about a Continental war for over a decade. The men who went on to command field-force divisions of the British Army against Germany and Italy in the Second World War were typically young and up-and-coming thrusters. Many were younger than their German counterparts. The vast majority, 92 per cent, had served in the Great War. Only a tiny proportion, 4 per cent, were old enough to have served in the Boer War. Most divisional commanders in the Second World War, therefore, had

relatively recent ‘personal knowledge of front-line service’ and possessed what Napoleon referred to as one of the greatest attributes that any general required, luck (because they had survived the war).⁴² They were also broadly competent; 92 per cent of divisional commanders who had served in the First World War had been awarded medals for gallantry or leadership of a high order.⁴³

Furthermore, by the interwar years, the British Army had overcome the worst of its innate conservatism and was a relatively meritocratic organisation. Promotion was no longer a function of seniority and the majority of divisional commanders in the Second World War were members of not particularly fashionable line infantry regiments.⁴⁴ The abolition of purchase in 1871 and the introduction of competitive entrance examinations at the military academies at Sandhurst and Woolwich ‘had caused a slow but inexorable decline in the dominance of the landed squirearchy within the officer corps’. Whereas, in 1860, over half of all incoming Sandhurst cadets had listed their fathers’ occupation as ‘gentlemen’, by 1930, only one in ten did so; this was at a time when almost one-quarter of German Army officers could be described as ‘noblemen’.⁴⁵

Senior officers were also highly professional, 98 per cent coming from the regular British Army as opposed to 2 per cent being territorials. As many as 79 per cent had received some form of military higher education before 1939, in most cases a PSC (Passed Staff College), as compared to 49 per cent for divisional commanders in the First World War. Of those who would command corps or armies in the field in North Africa, Italy and North-West Europe, 94 per cent were Staff College graduates. ‘Officers who lacked “push”, “ambition” and “ruthlessness” did not enter the staff colleges; nor did they succeed there’;⁴⁶ Sir Edmund Ironside, when commandant at Camberley in 1925, wrote that ‘a modern commander must be a highly educated, very fit and very intelligent man’.⁴⁷ What applied to senior officers also applied to those at the very top of the military hierarchy; when the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, appointed Lord Gort, the future commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), as his military secretary in September 1937, it was welcomed by *The Times* as an indication of his determination to ensure that senior officers were young enough to withstand the physical and mental strains of mechanised warfare, and, perhaps more importantly, ‘progressive enough’ to find solutions to the problems it was creating.⁴⁸

Doctrine

Not only was the level of preparation of the Army, from a materiel and manpower perspective, more multifaceted than is often recognised, but recent scholarship has also shown that the Army's intellectual (doctrinal) preparation for war was far more advanced, modern and reflective than suggested in the literature.⁴⁹ During the interwar years the Army never 'entirely lost sight of the need to fight a European enemy with modern equipment'. Hitler's rise to power and Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations and the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933, persuaded the hierarchy of the Army that 'its main mission was to prepare for a continental land war'. The General Staff 'remained wedded to this priority, and it guided training' for most of the 1930s.⁵⁰ In the interwar years, the General Staff issued no fewer than four editions of its main doctrinal manual, the *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, the 'tactical bible of all the British Commonwealth armies'. This compared with the two editions of German and French doctrine produced during the same period and was, as one historian has put it, 'itself proof that the British army was trying hard to understand the lessons of the First World War'.⁵¹

In fact, there is much to indicate that the British Army had identified the key intellectual and doctrinal aspects to the coming war well before 1939. One of the main developments was the rejection by the Army of the attrition-based siege warfare that had characterised engagements on the Western Front. Instead, it sought to ensure speed, mobility and surprise in its battlefield behaviour by embracing modern technology, through the use of tanks, trucks and air power. By 1937, just 6,544 horses and mules remained in service in the Army, compared to 28,244 in 1913. The Royal Artillery was in the process of converting to motorised gun tractors and large numbers of soldiers were being transported by road as more and more infantry platoons were issued with lorries. 'By the time of the invasion of Poland, the British Army in Europe was rather more motorized than the German Army.'⁵²

Furthermore, the Army was wedded to the necessity of all arms co-operating in battle to ensure decisive results.⁵³ Speaking after an exercise in 1927, George Milne, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), noted that 'it is the co-operation of all necessary arms that wins battles' and that this understanding should be the 'basis' for training in the future. 'I want that to be your principle in training', he

said, ‘combination and co-operation of arms.’⁵⁴ All four iterations of *FSR* emphasised the same necessity, for all arms to co-operate intimately in battle; infantry were hopelessly vulnerable without artillery and anti-tank support; the artillery could not conquer territory on its own; and tanks needed infantry and artillery to overcome hostile anti-tank weapons, to open passages through defiles and to consolidate ground gained. A course on inter-service co-operation was taught in the second year at Staff College during the interwar years⁵⁵ and the Kirke Report (1932), on the lessons of the First World War, endorsed the doctrine that mobility could be achieved on the battlefield only by combined arms action designed to generate superior firepower.⁵⁶

The emphasis on co-operation extended also to the Army’s relationship with the RAF. *FSR* had little to say about the air and land battle,⁵⁷ but that did not mean that the necessity for co-operation with an air component was lost on the War Office. During the interwar period there was an ongoing dispute between the General Staff and the Air Staff over who should control the air/land interface. It was in part the Army’s obsession with the importance of close air support, as opposed to other more ‘strategic’ air-power roles, that ‘moved the government to establish a separate air service’ in the first place.⁵⁸ ‘Bitter controversy’ over the creation of the RAF, its role in Imperial policing and the priority it accorded to independent bombing, meant that most interactions between the Army and RAF during the interwar years were characterised by friction or even open hostility. Nevertheless, each service continued to ‘assert that the closest co-operation between air and land forces was essential’. For example, considerable experience was gained from joint exercises during the interwar years where ‘many of the rudimentary problems associated with co-ordinating air-ground operations were identified’ and solutions learned.⁵⁹ The RAF Staff College included lectures on Army Co-Operation in a European War in its syllabus; an Army Co-Operation School ran annual courses for air and army officers; manuals on air/land co-operation were released during the interwar years; and between 1931 and 1934 Wing Commander J. C. Slessor gave a series of lectures at the Staff College at Camberley analysing air operations in the Great War (the lectures were later, in 1936, published as a book titled *Air Power and Armies*).⁶⁰

The problem was not that each service eschewed the need for co-operation, but that they saw co-operation very differently. The General Staff wanted the air force to focus primarily on direct

support of land operations (close air support), while the Air Staff thought it could best co-operate with the Army by attacking the enemy's means of production (strategic bombing) or through long-range interdiction of enemy HQs or communication networks.⁶¹ This meant that the RAF placed close air support at the bottom of its priority list, which, in turn, as the war approached, left the General Staff nervous that an 'air striking force would be unavailable to assist . . . in its land campaign because it would be off conducting its own bombing operations'. They pointed specifically to recent developments in Spain and China, where the value of aircraft operating in close support of an army had been, in their view, conclusively proven. These differences were not ironed out by the time the war started in September 1939, but, even though the Army entered the war in a less-than-perfect situation with regards to air support, it is clear that it did recognise that air support, as the General Staff expounded in a 1939 report on 'RAF Services for the Field Force', was 'as essential to the operations of the field force as any other form of support'.⁶²

Recent research has also shown that command and control in the British Army was far more flexible and decentralised than has generally been acknowledged in the literature.⁶³ The perception that the interwar British Army fostered an autocratic top-down command and control system that inhibited the initiative and freedom of subordinate commanders has long been part of the historiography. These arguments, however, emerge more from an assessment of practice – how the British Army fought post-1942 – than they do from an explicit exploration of the doctrine used pre-1939.⁶⁴ A closer analysis of doctrine in this period, shows that British commanders were, to a far greater extent than commonly understood, encouraged to exercise initiative in battle and trust in their own professional powers of deduction. For example, the 1936 *FSR Volume III: Operations – Higher Formations* stated:

In dealing with his subordinates, a commander will allot them definite tasks, clearly explaining his intentions, and will then allow them liberty of action in arranging the methods by which they will carry out these tasks. Undue centralisation and interference with subordinates is harmful, since they are apt either to chafe at excessive control or to become afraid of taking responsibility.⁶⁵

The lessons from the First World War could not have been clearer. The Kirke Committee reported in 1932 that for a timely, reactive system for the conduct of battle, ‘the idea is that a commander should be able to carry on with his own resources on simple verbal orders or instructions containing the superior’s object and general plan, until a change in the general situation again requires the intervention of higher authority on broad lines’.⁶⁶

What was true for senior commanders applied equally to junior officers. *FSR Volume II – Operations General* (1935) stated:

1. An order must contain only what the recipient requires to know, in order to carry out his task. Any attempt to prescribe to a subordinate commander at a distance anything that he, with a fuller knowledge of local conditions, should be able to decide on the spot will be avoided.
2. In framing orders for operations, the general principle is that the object to be attained, with such information as affects its attainment, will be briefly but clearly stated: the actual method of attaining the object will be given in sufficient detail to ensure co-ordination of effort, but so as not to interfere with the initiative of subordinate commanders, who should be left freedom of action in all matters which they can or should arrange for themselves.⁶⁷

The same publication, in an attempt to help commanders manage the chaos of battle, prioritised verbal orders for transmission of the commander’s plan, and stressed the importance of cutting out unnecessary detail and repetition, making orders faster to write and easier to digest. Dedicated liaison personnel were also recommended, and, as the war approached, greater efforts were made to make use of wireless communications.⁶⁸

This approach was stressed in training pamphlets. ‘Military Training Pamphlet No. 23 (Operations) Part I: General Principles, Fighting Troops and their Characteristics’, produced in September 1939, stated that:

It is essential that a com[man]d[er] shall make his intentions clear to his subordinates . . . By this means alone can subordinates be placed in a position where they are able to appreciate how best they can act intelligently and employ the means at

their disposal to further the interests of the higher com[man]d[er]'s Plan.⁶⁹

It is clear, therefore, that commanders were expected to balance available means with the expressed intentions of their superior officers. In other words, they were required to use their initiative and intelligence and act strategically. British doctrine, at this time, rather than encouraging a system of restrictive control, overwhelmingly embraced directive control: what modern militaries refer to as 'mission command' – a form of command and control not too dissimilar to the arrangements (*Auftragstaktik*) developed by the *Wehrmacht* in the interwar years.⁷⁰

Training and Organisation

The ambition during the interwar years was clearly, therefore, as General Sir Philip Chetwode put it in 1921, 'to evolve a much harder hitting, quicker moving and, above all, a quicker deploying division' than the British Army had ever had before.⁷¹ This ambitious goal was undermined, however, by serious problems with training in the interwar Army. Throughout the 1930s, training programmes had been focused on a European war against a first-class enemy. Nevertheless, the extent and character of these training programmes were not always up to a very high standard. Whereas the British Army had only undergone two-corps-level exercises in the interwar years, the *Reichswehr* held corps manoeuvres on an annual cycle since 1926.⁷² The combined forces manoeuvres held in Germany in September 1937 involved 159,000 troops, 25,000 horses, 20,000 vehicles, 800 tanks, 180 batteries of anti-aircraft guns, and 800 aeroplanes. Twenty-eight soldiers were killed in the course of the exercise.⁷³ By the time the *Wehrmacht* confronted the BEF in 1940 it had also fought in Poland and absorbed the lessons of that campaign.⁷⁴

By contrast, none of the officers who commanded major formations in the British Army in 1939–40 'had any experience of doing so in peacetime manoeuvres' and had, needless to say, not benefited from the experience of the Polish campaign. Senior officers had to make do with other forms of training, such as signals exercises, tactical exercises without troops (TEWTS), war games, and staff tours, which were easier to organise 'but often lacked realism'.

This meant that officers, notwithstanding their involvement in the First World War, had little recent experience in practicing combined arms manoeuvres; brigade and divisional manoeuvres designed to train commanders and units of different arms to co-operate were crammed into a five-week period every year.⁷⁵ The situation was no better for territorial units:

In theory, Territorial units and formations were supposed to undergo tactical training at one of the four weekend camps each unit attended and at their annual camp, which lasted for a fortnight. In reality, combined arms training rarely took place even at the annual camp. So rudimentary was the state of individual training that many Territorials confined their work at camp to unit and sub-unit training. The only training most senior Territorial officers received in combined arms operations took the form of TEWTs, with the result that they rarely had the ‘actual chance of seeing the co-operation of all arms’. The result . . . was that by 1939 the Territorial knew even less of combined arms practices than the regulars.⁷⁶

The blame for this training deficit does not fall entirely on the Army; funds, equipment and space were not made available during the interwar years to allow for large-scale training on the German model.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, such difficulties do not absolve officers at all levels of the British Army from their collective responsibility to assign a greater priority to training. An army that practiced directive control simply had to train, for success in battle rested ultimately on the shoulders of junior and middle-ranking officers tasked with translating a commander’s intent into meaningful, intelligent and successful actions in the chaos of battle. With the bridge between understanding and meaningful practice – intensive training – notably absent during the interwar years, there were few opportunities to truly test theory and ensure that the Army was prepared for the hard, practical realities of twentieth-century combat.

The requirement for focused training was compounded by the manner in which the interwar Army was organised. An army that was expected to fight in conditions as varied as the plains of North-West Europe, the jungles of South-East Asia, the deserts of North Africa and the mountains of the North-West Frontier had to be highly flexible.

In light of this challenge, British battalions and divisions were equipped only with those weapons that they needed irrespective of the environment in which they found themselves. Supporting weapons – such as tanks and heavy-, medium- and anti-aircraft artillery – were provided in ancillary units, controlled at corps or army level and deployed where necessary.⁷⁸

This kind of flexibility made sense in the context of an imperial army spread out across the world, but it did leave British commanders ‘dangerously dependent on fire-support weapons that they themselves did not control’ directly. For example, whereas a German division commander possessed 138 heavy machine guns under his direct control, a British division commander had none. Instead, he had to co-operate with separate machine-gun battalions, which were organised as corps troops. The same situation pertained to light anti-aircraft guns, leaving front-line units vulnerable to enemy close air support unless co-operation was good or the RAF had established air superiority. The problem was no less severe at brigade level; whereas a German brigade commander had direct control over eight artillery pieces, allowing him to lay on a quick fire-plan, using assets under his own immediate control, British brigade commanders, when in need of artillery support, had to go through the time-consuming business of requesting it from the division. The upshot was that a British battalion or brigade commander might enjoy the advantage of considerably heavier artillery support than his German counterpart, due to the fact that British divisions had a greater number of guns, but, ‘whether he actually received it, and how quickly it could be delivered, depended upon how well his communications with his supporting gunners were working. If they were not, the construction of a suitable fire-plan could take a great deal of time and significantly retard the tempo of operations.’⁷⁹

Similar problems with co-ordination were evident with regards to the Army’s use of armour and air power. By placing tank brigades, made up of slow moving, but heavily armoured, infantry support tanks, in independent formations outside the divisional organisation and by making armoured divisions, made up of more fast-moving ‘cruiser’ or cavalry tanks, extremely tank ‘heavy’, with few infantry and artillery units, the General Staff made achieving co-operation more difficult. Matters were no different with regards to the air/land battle. As Major-General Hugh

Massy, the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff (DCIGS), wrote in September 1939:

The Germans enjoyed unified control of their land and air forces operating together under Army command, whereas the British employed separate commanders for ground and air. For the British method to work efficiently . . . perfect co-operation and agreement must be assured and, in the fog of war, such efficiency is always in doubt.⁸⁰

This really was at the heart of the issue; ‘the need to generate superior fire-power by co-ordinating the assets of several . . . layers of command’ was simply more difficult than co-ordinating the actions of units directly under the control of a single commander. Both the German and British armies recognised the need for combined arms warfare and the importance of devolving command and control to key decision makers at the front. But, the organisation of the British Army, as logical as it was in the prevailing circumstances, combined with a deficient training regime, ‘threatened to reduce the tempo of . . . operations’, and undermine the power of subordinate commanders to act rapidly on their own initiative.⁸¹

Politics and Public Morale

In some ways, therefore, Britain, and its Army, the backbone of the British and Commonwealth Armies during the interwar years, was relatively well prepared for the commencement of hostilities in September 1939. In others, it was not. Success and failure on the battlefield were to depend on more than materiel, manpower, doctrine, training and organisation alone, however. It was to rely also on morale,⁸² and in a citizen army made up of volunteers and conscripts, the morale of the people mattered a great deal. Here, however, the British world system was undermined by internal political and social weaknesses, many of which had their origins in the memory of the First World War and the impact of the Great Depression.

The experience of the First World War affected in many ways the manner in which war generally was imagined during the interwar years. The ‘unprecedented shock’ of the vast numbers of war dead ‘meant the end of nineteenth-century optimism’. It was ‘impossible to wake from four years of warfare as from an ordinary nightmare’.

To deal with the mourning and suffering and the social dislocation, it was vital, in most cases, to ‘sustain the meaning of the war’ and since the soldiers had fallen in the name of the state, the state had to keep true to their memories. On 19 July 1919, the same day as the great victory parade in London, the Cenotaph was unveiled at Whitehall. Military cemeteries were built on the battlefields of Europe, and beyond, and memorials were set up in soldiers’ home towns and villages, bringing the war deep into communities that had escaped the physical destruction of the front. These memorials conveyed ‘the fear of oblivion – of forgetting’ by occupying highly visible settings in public squares or near important buildings; in New Zealand they were commonly put at the entrance to rugby grounds. The monuments ‘evoked the obligation of the postwar nation to remember and live up to the sacrifice made by its combatants’.⁸³

For some, the ultimate ‘obligation’, or meaning of the war and its sacrifices, was the end to all war.⁸⁴ Most, however, appeared to crave a ‘middle way between isolationism and militarism’.⁸⁵ For yet others, veterans, widows, and orphans, the creators and embodiments of ‘living memory’, the meaning of the war revolved around demands for recognition and gratitude for their sacrifices for the state.⁸⁶ In this context, the failure to provide what can broadly be referred to as ‘homes fit for heroes’ in the interwar years proved particularly damaging for the relationship between the state and its citizens. As the Canadian Stephen Leacock wrote in *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*, ‘conscription has its other side. The obligation to die must carry with it the right to live.’⁸⁷

In Britain, the failure to live up to the promises of the ‘Great War’ struck hard, especially as the ‘dark clouds’ of unemployment ‘hung persistently over the country’ for much of the interwar period. Between 1921 and 1939, the official unemployment total never fell below 1 million, and the unofficial total was significantly higher;⁸⁸ the average unemployment rate was 14.2 per cent of the working population.⁸⁹ Unemployment remained over 2 million a year between 1930 and 1939⁹⁰ and the proportion of those unemployed for a year or more increased fivefold between 1929 and 1936.⁹¹ The north of England, Scotland and Wales, key recruiting grounds for the British Army, suffered most.⁹² In 1939, 15 per cent of all insured workers in Tyne and Wear were out of work. In Wales, it was 20 per cent; in Northern Ireland, it was 25 per cent.⁹³ New products and a decline in

demand from overseas impacted upon heavy industries and textiles. Nearly half of the rise in unemployment between 1929 and 1932 was in iron and steel, coal, shipbuilding, cotton and mechanical engineering.⁹⁴

By contrast, the traditionally more prosperous Midlands and south-east (especially Birmingham and London) avoided the worst of the Depression due to their diverse portfolio of industries and a rising population.⁹⁵ For the 19 million or so workers that were employed during these decades, decreases in wages were compensated for by lower prices; thus living standards rose for many.⁹⁶ However, 'it was the unfairness' and unevenness of the Depression that made the period 'so difficult to bear'.⁹⁷ These vicissitudes had important psycho-social as well as economic consequences. Where there was a lack of opportunity to work, 'which for considerable numbers of the unemployed persisted hopelessly for many months', there 'was bound, despite the palliatives that were created', to be a weakening of 'morale'.⁹⁸ The problem of unemployment was not ameliorated until preparations for war began following the Munich crisis in 1938.⁹⁹

In spite of these challenges, British politics between the wars was remarkably stable. With the exception of two minority Labour governments, which held power for a total of only three years, the Conservatives were continually in office, whether in their own right or as the dominant partner in a coalition, from the armistice in 1918 through to the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁰⁰ By 1939, with the introduction of universal suffrage, Britain had become a fully fledged democracy, something that could not be said prior to 1914.¹⁰¹ However, the question remained, to what extent was Britain to be a 'social' democracy?¹⁰² The party of Stanley Baldwin and Chamberlain 'offered a combination of sound financial methods and cautious social progress', but 'showed little of the urgency associated with pre-1914 Liberalism'. For the most part, the Conservative Party 'was resolutely opposed to major extensions of state power, and had little sympathy with the advocates of far-reaching change'.¹⁰³ Pressure for a comprehensive social welfare scheme, full employment and corporatist planning had begun in the early 1930s, but these demands had 'foundered' due to practical, but also philosophical considerations; 'that they would require central government to play a new and constitutionally illegitimate role in the direction of national life'.¹⁰⁴ Many, thus, still saw Britain as 'governed by patronage and networks of almost caste-like

exclusivity',¹⁰⁵ and there was a widespread feeling that something had gone wrong in the interwar years.¹⁰⁶ Instead of homes fit for heroes, successive governments were perceived as having turned their attention 'to maintaining a land safe for investments' and most of the old economic and political structures, which had seemed so threatened by the First World War, were restored and re-entrenched.¹⁰⁷

The situation was just as complex, varied and challenging across the Commonwealth. In the decades leading to the outbreak of war, the circumstances that conditioned life in South Africa 'changed dramatically, sometimes traumatically'.¹⁰⁸ South African firms had few investments on the New York stock exchange and, initially at least, South Africa was relatively isolated from the worst effects of the slump. However, as the international prices of South African maize and wool dropped and international and domestic demand for South African goods contracted, many companies cut wages, and bankruptcies and unemployment soared. To add to South Africa's economic woes, the country experienced a period of severe drought in 1931 and 1932¹⁰⁹ and 'most white households', not to mention the millions of black and coloured South Africans, 'suffered hardship, or at least some sort of economic reverse'.¹¹⁰ According to the report of the Carnegie commission of enquiry into white poverty in South Africa in 1932, almost 200,000 to 300,000, out of a total white population of about 2 million, could be classified as being 'very poor'.¹¹¹

Partly as a response to this economic challenge, the National Party (NP), led by the Prime Minister, General J. B. M. Hertzog, and the South African Party (SAP), led by the leader of the opposition, General Jan Smuts, formed a coalition government in March 1933. In the general election that followed, in May, the Coalition swept the boards, taking 136 of 150 seats in the House of Assembly. In December 1934, the two parties merged to form the United South African National Party (usually shortened to the United Party, or UP), in a party-political reorganisation known as 'Fusion'.¹¹²

The Fusion Government appeared to solve the key problems facing South Africa. The country experienced steady industrial growth from about 1933 onwards. Between 1932 and 1937, the annual gross national product rose from £217 million to £370 million. There was relatively little increase in the cost of living, so many people experienced real and substantial improvements in living standards. Between 1932

and 1939, well over 100,000 whites found employment.¹¹³ Furthermore, by agreeing upon South Africa's status as a fully self-governing dominion with the King as head of state, Fusion appeared 'to have buried the long-standing quarrel between "republicans" and "loyalists", and paved the way for a (white) South African identity common to both Afrikaners and English'.¹¹⁴

The path to an end of 'racialism' (referring to English–Afrikaner antipathy rather than the black–white struggle) and the new found economic prosperity seemed to be confirmed by the result of the 1938 election when the United Party trounced what was left of the old Nationalist party led by D. F. Malan.¹¹⁵ That is not to say that the spark of Afrikaner nationalism had been extinguished in the interwar years. Although the UP had an overwhelming majority in Parliament, Malan's party steadily increased its support amongst those Afrikaners who felt that fusion threatened their identity.¹¹⁶ Many saw the solution to the continuing poor-white problem, an issue that impacted especially on the Afrikaner portion of the white community, 'in unified economic, political and cultural action';¹¹⁷ even in 1939, almost 40 per cent of urbanised male Afrikaners found themselves occupied as manual labourers, mine workers, railway workers and bricklayers.¹¹⁸ Moreover, 'the social traumas' of poverty in the 1920s and 1930s for white men in a colonial society left 'destructive memories' which 'often pass[ed] down through the generations'.¹¹⁹

In Canada, the interwar years were for many a terrible hardship and disappointment.¹²⁰ For G. M. Smith, a distinguished soldier and winner of the Military Cross (MC) during the Great War, 'the idealism of youth, and its enthusiasm in fighting for what they considered a good cause, the optimistic spirit which filled the people during the war and reached its climax when the Armistice was signed' had all been 'shattered'. Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points had become 'the fourteen disappointments' and self-determination had become 'selfish determination'.¹²¹ The Depression hit Canada hard. With the United States, Canada experienced the Western world's most severe decline in industrial production and gross national product.¹²² Unemployment rose to record levels. In 1929, it had stood at 116,000. By 1932, it had risen to 741,000 and peaked at 826,000 in 1933. It declined to 411,000 in 1937 only to increase again to 529,000 by 1939.¹²³ Thus, at no stage during the 1930s did unemployment return to anywhere near its pre-Depression level. By 1933, unemployment accounted for fully

20 per cent of the total civilian labour force. In some areas, the figures rose as high as 35 and even 50 per cent.¹²⁴ In these circumstances, the unemployed, the destitute, and the sick had to rely on the charity of others, private groups, or government relief; by 1932, more than 1.5 million Canadians, or 15 per cent of the total population, depended on relief; over one-third of Montreal's francophones were on relief by 1933.¹²⁵ To make matters worse, the Prairie West also suffered from a climatic disaster, ten years of exceptional and persistent drought, extreme summer and winter temperatures, unusual weather patterns, and grasshopper infestations.¹²⁶

Some feared that these conditions would spark widespread violence or even revolution¹²⁷ and, indeed, Canadian politics in the interwar years was highly contentious on multiple levels. The First World War had caused a 'split along racial lines' in Canada. English Canada had supported the introduction of conscription in 1917, French Canada had not.¹²⁸ National disunity had been a high price to pay for the 45,000 conscripts that eventually made their way to the battlefields of Europe in 1918. 'It was', as one historian has put it, 'an unhappy nation that saw the war of exhaustion in Europe come to an end in November, 1918.'¹²⁹

The pain and racial bitterness of the war years lingered on into the peace¹³⁰ and it was, in many ways, a man who focused on 'national unity' above all else, the leader of the Liberal Party from 1919 to 1948, William Lyon Mackenzie King, that dominated Canadian politics in the interwar years.¹³¹ Mackenzie King was in power between 1921 and 1930 and between 1935 and 1948. He had sided with the anti-conscription lobby in 1917¹³² and was also a progressive and a reformer, who opposed conservative forces in Canada and was 'appalled at labour conditions' and 'believed that workers deserved good treatment, fair wages and representation'.¹³³ In this way, he was able to call on support from Quebec and the left throughout the interwar years, a factor that was crucial as he led minority governments between 1921 and 1930.¹³⁴

Both before and after the depression, Mackenzie King advocated 'social justice' in Canada.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, a number of small parties with clear and more radical socialist agendas developed in the provinces during the interwar years,¹³⁶ not least due to the fact that the Conservatives and Liberals appeared 'committed to riding out the Depression without disrupting existing financial and state institutions

in any fundamental manner'.¹³⁷ These movements, often tied to farm organisations, 'protested the adoption of economic policies designed to benefit eastern manufacturers, bankers, and other elite groups at the expense of ordinary producers'. In 1921, the newly formed Progressive Party won the second largest share of seats in the Federal Parliament and in the 1930s, the heirs to the Progressives, the Social Credit Party and the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) made big strides forward with the electorate.¹³⁸ If stability of administration was a characteristic of Canadian politics during the interwar years – 'It's King or Chaos' rang the Liberal campaign slogan in 1935 – it masked a groundswell of more radical opinion that wanted the political economy of the country to be significantly reordered.¹³⁹

In Australia, as in the other Commonwealth countries, the war brought an end to a decade of soaring unemployment and social distress.¹⁴⁰ Between 1930 and 1934, more than 20 per cent of wage and salary earners were out of work. To these were added school leavers who failed to find a job; others, mostly women, withdrew from the workforce; and a further group of employees worked reduced hours. By the middle of 1932 as many as 1 million people in a total workforce of a little over 2 million lacked full-time employment.¹⁴¹ The situation was worse than in Britain; the level of distress was closer to that of Canada, another country that relied heavily on the export of commodities. Immediately after the crash, more than half the country's exports were needed just to meet payments due on foreign loans.¹⁴²

The gulf between the employed and unemployed was a striking feature of the Depression in Australia. Inequalities of wealth and income widened. The 1933 census revealed that unemployed men had on average been out of work for two years. Popular representations of the Depression depicted 'men and women tossed about by inexorable forces, stripped of dignity by constant humiliation and reduced by hunger to passive stupor'. The birth rate dropped to a new low and immigration and population growth slowed considerably. The ruling United Australia Party appeared to be bereft of ideas and was, according to some, dominated by sectional interests; one of its own members described it as 'a sort of government of the feeble for the greedy'.¹⁴³ By the end of the decade, both in absolute and proportional terms, unemployment was still higher than it had been in 1929.¹⁴⁴

In the period between the world wars, politics at the federal level in Australia was dominated by the non-Labor parties, who were in

power for all but twenty-six months.¹⁴⁵ In 1916, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which had been in government from the start of the war, split over its leader's (W. M. Hughes) support for the introduction of conscription. Hughes was expelled from the ALP; but he retained the premiership at the head of a coalition made up of defectors from the Labor Party and their former political opponents, the Liberals. The new party, the Nationalist Party, remained in power until 1923 when it lost its majority but managed to hold on to power by changing its leader and by forming a new coalition with the Country Party (which represented farmers and city businessmen). This coalition remained in office until the end of the decade.¹⁴⁶

The Labor Party returned to power under James Scullin in the week that the Depression hit Australia. It 'failed both to protect jobs and to protect the jobless'¹⁴⁷ and split again in 1931, five of its members defecting to join the conservatives in a new political grouping that included the Nationalists, called the United Australia Party (UAP). The UAP won the election of December 1931 and remained in power for the rest of the decade. This 'conservative ascendancy' aimed to 'put Australia back on "sound" business lines' after what had been deemed 'Labor's dangerous flirtation with unorthodox and un-British policies' during the Depression.¹⁴⁸

In New Zealand, the prosperity expected to continue after the First World War did not materialise.¹⁴⁹ During the 1920s, New Zealand sent on average at least 75 per cent of its exports to, and bought 50 per cent of its imports from, Britain. Thus, fluctuations in overseas demand hit New Zealand hard. With the arrival of the Depression, export income nearly halved. The Conservative Government (a coalition between the United Party and the Reform Party) slashed expenditure, provoking anger at its 'seeming indifference to the needs of ordinary people'. The principle of 'no pay without work' – there was no payment of a 'dole' – led to 'massive' public works schemes. The Government 'laid off staff and re-employed them at relief rates'. Arbitration in industrial disputes and union membership ceased to be compulsory, 'giving more power to employers'.¹⁵⁰ In the worst of the crisis, some cohorts of the male population (the Maori) had a rate of unemployment of 40 per cent. More generally, unemployment fluctuated between 12 to 15 per cent for the Depression years. This level of unemployment 'overwhelmed charities and charitable aid boards', etching the image

of ‘the soup kitchen in popular memory’.¹⁵¹ Although the experience of the Depression was varied, on the whole it aligned along class and occupational boundaries;¹⁵² this ‘left a gulf between the unemployed and the employed, between workers – especially casual labour – and the privileged’ and the gap between rich and poor widened.¹⁵³

New Zealand politics during the interwar years, much as was the case elsewhere in the Commonwealth, was dominated by conservative parties. In the 1920s, Labour gained some traction in the cities but mostly failed to garner mainstream support ‘until it abandoned its platform of socialisation, especially the nationalisation of land’.¹⁵⁴ The turning point came with the Depression and in November 1935 Labour, led by Michael J. Savage, won a landslide victory. The Labour Party’s election manifesto promised to use the ‘wonderful resources of the Dominion’ to restore ‘a decent living standard’ to those who had ‘been deprived of essentials for the past five years’. It pledged to restructure the economy and to secure a comfortable standard of living for all.¹⁵⁵

The new Labour Government believed that by increasing the purchasing power of the ordinary New Zealander, through state intervention in the economy and benefits, it would boost the economy, and ‘it did’.¹⁵⁶ Recovery from the Depression was ‘unusually fast’ and by 1938 real GDP per capita had risen by a third.¹⁵⁷ Unemployment remained stubbornly high;¹⁵⁸ nevertheless, Labour managed to change the narrative. It succeeded in closing the gap between rich and poor and through intervention in the economy, reforms to pensions, healthcare and unemployment benefits, culminating in the Social Security Act of 1938, a true social citizenship was born.¹⁵⁹

In language that would be echoed in the more radical aspects of United States (US) President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s four freedoms,¹⁶⁰ Walter Nash, Minister of Finance, argued that:

There is and can be no freedom in any real sense of the term so long as a large proportion of the population is perpetually faced with the fear of economic and social insecurity. What freedom did the unemployed have, under the last government, to bring up a healthy and happy family? How free were the invalids who had to depend for their livelihood on the charity of others? How much liberty did the old people enjoy – trying to eke out

a miserable existence on 17s 6d a week? Did the widows and the orphans and the sick appreciate the wonderful heritage of freedom and liberty bequeathed to them? 'Freedom' ... to the Labour Party ... involves above all else the right to enjoy the necessities of life and the amenities of a decent, civilised existence.¹⁶¹

By 1939, New Zealand was firmly on the path towards building a progressive society where ordinary people were protected from the inherent uncertainty of the market and freed from anxieties and hardships caused by circumstances over which they had little control.¹⁶²

The same could not be said for India. On the economic front, 'stagnation and mass poverty' remained the 'dominant' feature in most peoples' lives on the subcontinent. Much like Australia and Canada, the fall in worldwide commodity prices due to the Great Depression hit hard. Prices dropped a remarkable 41 per cent between 1929 and 1934; prices of agricultural produce went down 44 per cent between 1929 and 1931 alone. Thus, the Depression 'spelled total disaster' for many of the 'small producers at the bottom of the hierarchy'. To make matters worse, population growth meant that there was less and less new land available for cultivation. The recovery was slow, and in terms of agricultural prices it came only after 1939, when wartime inflation displaced the deflation of the 1930s.¹⁶³ With India's weak economic base and largely peasant-based agrarian society, average annual per capita income was extremely low (60 rupees, or £4 10s), nutrition standards were inadequate and much of the population lived at subsistence level. The standard of education was similarly low and there was a widespread lack of trade skills.¹⁶⁴

The 'plight of large sections of the peasantry', including the better-off strata, led to disenchantment and, in no small part, to the 'massive rural rally around Gandhian Civil Disobedience' in the 1930s.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, the interwar years were dominated by political strife and the growth in calls for Indian independence from Britain.¹⁶⁶ 'Political India' had widely expected that, in exchange for the sacrifices made during the First World War, there would be an increase in India's political status afterwards, at the least to make it a self-governing dominion. Such expectations were rapidly disappointed, leading to over two decades of nationalist, revolutionary and other political activity. Congress finally achieved some real power through the Government

of India Act of 1935, which placed the provinces under elected ministers who controlled all provincial departments. But British-appointed governors in the provinces still retained 'special powers', while in Delhi the defence and foreign affairs portfolios were placed outside the control of the legislature and remained in British hands. Congress swept the provincial elections in 1937, perhaps an illustration of challenges to come. Nevertheless, to many, British power seemed secure and Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India between 1936 and 1943, was confident that interwar reforms and concessions had been 'best calculated, on a long view, to hold India to the Empire'.¹⁶⁷

Structure and Contingency

In 1914, the British Army was in a position within two weeks of mobilisation to send five well-equipped and organised divisions to France; in 1939 it would take thirty days to transfer only three divisions to the Continent.¹⁶⁸ In spite of the fact that Britain was less ready for war in 1939 than it had been in 1914, it would be unfair to argue that Britain was totally unprepared for another world war. It is too easy to paint a picture of incompetence across the Channel, in contrast to Britain's enemy, who, with Teutonic efficiency prepared for the next great conflagration. As Adam Tooze has argued, 'we must clearly set aside any idea that the armaments effort of the Third Reich was carefully tailored towards the construction of a motorized "blitzkrieg" juggernaut'.¹⁶⁹

The British state, a 'warfare state', was one of 'plenty, of armed forces generously supplied with new equipment by new factories ... The context of British action was not, as so often suggested, one of weakness, isolation and austerity, but rather of abundance of key resources'.¹⁷⁰ As propaganda later in the war stressed, Britain was supported by a massive reserve of manpower; 'one out of every five persons in the world is an Indian'.¹⁷¹ Britain went to war in 1939 allied with France 'in pursuit of great interest, by choice'. She went to war 'believing in victory'.¹⁷²

Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the British Army suffered 744,702 dead and 1,693,262 wounded between 1914 and 1918, and in spite of subsequent claims that 'the best of a generation had disappeared on the Western Front',¹⁷³ the British Army that prepared to fight the Second World War was, in the main, led by a cadre of generals

that were professional, committed and, by standards of the time, well educated. Britain planned to fight ‘the next war, not the last’.¹⁷⁴ The War Office had made considerable efforts to understand the lessons of the First World War and by 1939 had successfully predicted the character of the forthcoming conflict, with its requirement for all-arms co-operation and integration. It had also developed a doctrine that encouraged its commanders to take responsibility in battle and trust their subordinates in a manner more commonly associated with the German Army of the Second World War.¹⁷⁵

Notwithstanding these many positive factors, the Cabinet’s decision to leave an expansion of the Army to the very last moment did inevitably lead to short-term deficiencies, especially in the quality of training – that essential bridge between theory and practice.¹⁷⁶ These military deficiencies were exacerbated by the impacts of the two socio-economic catastrophes of the first years of the twentieth century, the First World War and the Great Depression. War, as Stuart Macintyre has argued, ‘is sometimes regarded as a regenerative force’, rather like a ‘bushfire that consumes energy, burns away the outmoded accretion of habit and allows new, more vigorous growth to occur. The Great War brought no such national revitalization’:

It killed, maimed and incapacitated. It left an incubus of debt that continued to mount as the payments to veterans and war widows continued; even in the depths of the Depression of the early 1930s there were more . . . [citizens] on war benefits than in receipt of social welfare. Its public memorials were a constant reminder of loss but provided little solace to those who mourned, for the ethos of national sacrifice discouraged excessive personal grief as selfish. So, far from strengthening a common purpose, it weakened the attachment to duty: to live for the moment was a common response to the protracted ordeal. The war increased rather than lessened dependence, hardened prejudices, widened divisions.¹⁷⁷

To make matters worse, the history of employment between the two world wars was the story of ‘an almost continuous struggle against adversity’. These vicissitudes had ‘important economic and psychological consequences’. ‘The lack of opportunity for working, which for considerable numbers of the unemployed persisted hopelessly for many months, was bound, despite the palliatives that were created, to

weaken their morale.¹⁷⁸ For these reasons, in so far as there were structural influences on the events to come, they were ‘human’ and psychological to a greater extent than ‘material’.¹⁷⁹ While it is natural to search for explanations regarding the performance of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War in the preceding years of peace, too much has been made by historians of the unpreparedness of the Army for a second great global conflagration. A far more nuanced approach, freed where possible from hindsight is required. Defeat and disaster were by no means preordained in 1939; much would depend on the manner in which the state, its leaders and its publics would mobilise and react and adapt to the crisis of the outbreak of war.