

# 1 Introduction

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## Genesis

Around the Cabinet table on the morning of 19 September 1939, just over a fortnight into the war, sat the nine men responsible for its strategic direction.

In the chair was Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Now aged seventy, he was politically in a strong position, and his Conservative Party had an overall parliamentary majority of more than 200. Although criticised for the failure of appeasement, his stock was riding high, both within his own party and in public opinion. Even Anthony Eden, who had resigned as Foreign Secretary over the Munich agreement, remarked earlier in the year that Chamberlain had the makings of a really great Prime Minister, provided his health held out.<sup>1</sup> For six years Chancellor of the Exchequer before he became Prime Minister in 1937, Chamberlain tended to sympathise with the Treasury point of view, a trait that hitherto had served him not entirely for the worse. He was known to be a master of his brief, and his private secretaries were ‘amazed by his command of detail’.<sup>2</sup> Although outwardly self-confident, he was, even at this early stage of the war, deeply troubled by self-doubt. On 10 September he wrote to one of his sisters, ‘Whilst war was still averted, I felt indispensable for no-one else could carry out my policy. Today the position has changed. Half a dozen people could take my place while war is in progress and I do not see that I have any particular part to play until it comes to peace terms.’<sup>3</sup> Within a few weeks, following the sinking of the battleship *Royal Oak* at Scapa Flow, he was confiding in his other sister, ‘[H]ow I do hate and loathe this war. I was never meant to be a war minister, and the thought of all those homes wrecked with the *Royal Oak* makes me want to hand over my responsibilities to someone else.’<sup>4</sup> And when it was mentioned in Cabinet that the Chiefs of Staff might be about to recommend ‘gloves off’ in the air war, ‘he shook his head in a dull way as if it were too much to consider.’<sup>5</sup> By nature, Chamberlain was a conciliator – not just

in foreign policy terms but also in his style of leadership and management. If confrontation or 'unpleasantness' with colleagues could be avoided, he would almost always favour that path, a policy which worked better for him in time of peace than it was to in time of war.

One of Chamberlain's first tasks on the outbreak of war had been to decide on the size and membership of his Cabinet. In 1916 Lloyd George had formed a War Cabinet comprising a very small group of ministers, almost all without departmental responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain may have been influenced to some degree by this, but his approach was essentially pragmatic – 'My sole purpose was to find a Cabinet that would work'<sup>7</sup> – deciding on a membership of six ministers, two of whom headed full departments of state. The first of the latter was the Earl of Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, aged fifty-eight. Born into an aristocratic Yorkshire family, Edward Halifax had embarked on an academic career as a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, before entering politics. Appointed Viceroy of India, where he served from 1926 to 1931, he had occupied a series of ministerial jobs on his return before becoming Foreign Secretary in 1938. From 1934, reflecting his continuing affinity with academia, he had, in addition, been Chancellor of the University of Oxford. He was also a keen Master of Foxhounds and a devout High Anglican (or, as Labour Party leader Clement Attlee put it many years later, 'all hunting and Holy Communion'.)<sup>8</sup> Halifax had been, and remained, a close colleague of Chamberlain, an architect of appeasement, who by nature preferred consensus and compromise.<sup>9</sup> As one historian has noted, 'Both men . . . had a striking, not to say naïve belief in the power of reason and reasonableness.'<sup>10</sup> Halifax, though, was not beyond scheming behind Chamberlain's back and was seen by some as a potential alternative Prime Minister.

The other departmental minister to whom Chamberlain turned was Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Aged sixty-seven, Simon was another of the most experienced ministers in the peacetime Cabinet. Originally a member of the Liberal Party, he had founded and became leader of the breakaway Liberal Nationals and held two of the great offices of state – Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary – before succeeding his close political ally Chamberlain as Chancellor in 1938. Simon, too, was a leading advocate of appeasement. But his outstanding intellect and legal training were marred by what one biographer has described as 'his ability to see all sides of a complicated question [which] easily degenerated into an irritating inability to make up his mind'.<sup>11</sup> Nor was Simon's loyalty to be taken for granted; on the eve of war, he had suddenly and vociferously joined the group arguing for a more hawkish response to Hitler – a move prompted, it was said, because in it he 'saw his chance of becoming PM'.<sup>12</sup>

Also chosen by Chamberlain was the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, aged fifty-nine, who had been in one ministerial office or another – including that of Foreign Secretary – since 1923.<sup>13</sup> A tireless worker, but lacking in charisma, it was said that his ‘competence did not in public or private life make up for his lack of warmth’.<sup>14</sup> Although Chamberlain considered him to be an ally – Hoare was another supporter of appeasement – he would have known of Hoare’s notorious ambition. According to one of Chamberlain’s private secretaries, Hoare was known as ‘Slippery Sam, . . . [and] his intelligence was matched, or even surpassed, by his natural bent for intrigue’.<sup>15</sup> The Prime Minister appointed him to the wide-ranging, but non-departmental, post of Lord Privy Seal.

A more surprising choice was a man virtually unknown to the British public: a sixty-two-year-old retired civil servant, albeit of immense distinction, Lord Hankey. Maurice Hankey’s entire career, less five years as a Royal Marine, had been spent in the corridors of power, where he ‘progressively became secretary of everything that mattered’.<sup>16</sup> For twenty-two years until 1938 he had been Cabinet Secretary and hugely influential as a military advisor and diplomatic confidant with an unsurpassed expertise in national defence matters. Indeed, in 1938 he had recommended the structure of a wartime government in his ‘War Book’.<sup>17</sup> A professional bureaucrat to his fingertips, but with no experience as a politician, Hankey was appointed Minister without Portfolio.

Chamberlain also included the Earl Chatfield, aged sixty-six, because it would have been inconceivable for someone holding his appointment not to be. Chatfield was the Minister for Coordination of Defence, a retired Admiral of the Fleet<sup>18</sup> and former head of the Royal Navy. The job had been established in 1936 to oversee and coordinate the rearmament of British defences, and the Minister was expected to speak on behalf of all three services. The degree to which this appointment lived up its title will be discussed later.

Finally, Chamberlain invited someone whom he could not, politically, afford to leave out: Winston Churchill. Churchill, now two months short of his sixty-fifth birthday, had been the fiercest critic of appeasement, but his reputation and popularity meant that ‘he would have been a most troublesome thorn in our flesh if he had been outside’.<sup>19</sup> Churchill rejected Chamberlain’s offer of a non-departmental seat in the War Cabinet but agreed to become First Lord of the Admiralty (the minister for the Royal Navy) – the job he had held at the outset of the First World War.<sup>20</sup>

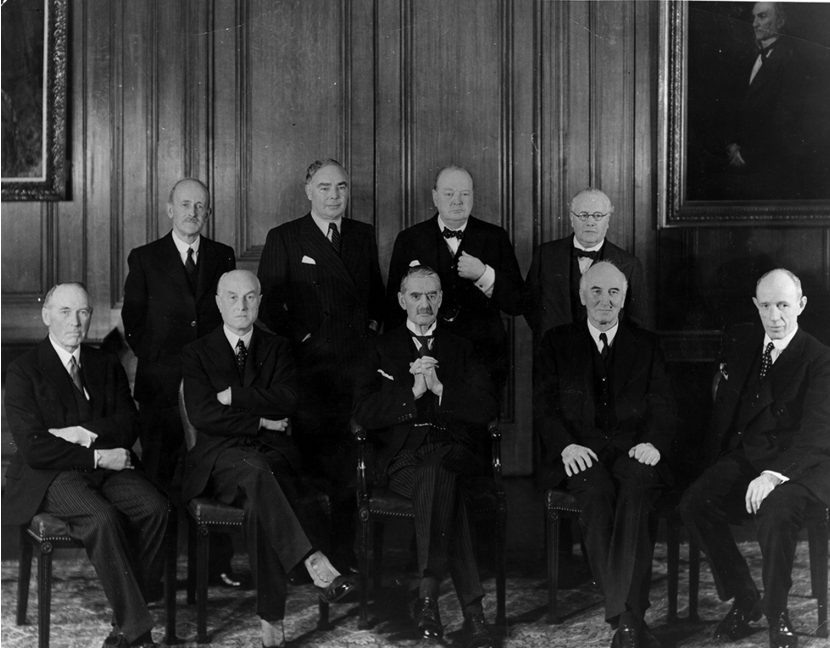


Figure 1.1 The War Cabinet, September 1939  
 (Standing: Hankey, Hore-Belisha, Churchill, Wood  
 Seated: Chatfield, Hoare, Chamberlain, Simon, Halifax)  
 (Getty Images)

This presented a problem. The other two service ministers – Leslie Hore-Belisha at the War Office and Sir Kingsley Wood at the Air Ministry – argued strongly, and successfully, for equal status. Both were admitted but knew that their membership was due entirely to Chamberlain’s need to have Churchill on board, and this was reflected in their standing within the War Cabinet.

Chamberlain’s War Cabinet was thus a hybrid – larger and with a greater proportion of departmental ministers than he would have wished. It also lacked the participation of the main opposition party, which had declined the invitation. (This was, in part, due to personal animosity. Attlee later recalled: ‘[H]e always treated us like dirt.’)<sup>21</sup> The War Cabinet contained what had been described since 1938 as the ‘inner Cabinet’ – Chamberlain, Halifax, Simon and Hoare – with five additions. Its average age was, as Churchill observed to Chamberlain, ‘[o]nly one year short of the Old Age Pension!’<sup>22</sup> With

one exception, Chamberlain had surrounded himself with like-minded ministers: calm, logical, sober, unemotional, reasonable and ‘gentlemanly’ – people he knew he could do business with. The exception, of course, was Churchill. Overall, Chamberlain’s War Cabinet contained many seeds of rivalry and disharmony, but arguably no more so than most other Cabinets before or since. In A. J. P. Taylor’s opinion, the government as a whole may have looked good on paper, but ‘only on paper. The war machine resembled an expensive motor car, beautifully polished, complete in every detail, except there was no petrol in the tank.’<sup>23</sup> Anyway, Chamberlain seemed well pleased with his creation: ‘[W]e are working together very harmoniously and successfully’, he recorded.<sup>24</sup>

This was the group that was sitting around the Cabinet table on 19 September, along with a few more junior ministers, the service Chiefs of Staff and sundry officials. They were considering for the first time a specific proposal for military action in Norway, and it was Churchill who had made it.

### Norway

On 1 September Churchill had returned to the Admiralty ‘to the room I had quitted in pain and sorrow almost exactly a quarter of a century before, when Lord Fisher’s resignation had led to my removal from my post as First Lord and ruined irretrievably, as it proved, the important conception of forcing the Dardanelles’.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the disastrous failure of the Dardanelles operation in 1915, and the major role that Churchill had played in it, was to cast a long shadow over the British campaign in Norway in 1940.

Clearly determined that the Royal Navy should take the fight to the enemy at the earliest opportunity (and be seen doing so), Churchill already had some ideas about how this might be achieved. The first of these was a scheme, uncannily reminiscent of the Dardanelles plan, to force a sea passage – this time into the Baltic with a small flotilla of large ships with specially reinforced armour plating and extra anti-aircraft guns. He had trailed this idea with a senior general two months earlier<sup>26</sup> and, on arrival at the Admiralty, had directed the naval staff to produce a report on Operation Catherine, as he christened it (‘because Russia lay in the background of my thought’<sup>27</sup>).

The second scheme was already under consideration at the Admiralty when Churchill arrived there. This concerned the interdiction of the export of Swedish iron ore to Germany. The Foreign Office had been aware for some years of the dependence of German industry on the large



Map 1.1 Scandinavia

quantity of high-grade iron ore imported from Sweden. In addition, in April 1939 the Foreign Office had drawn the Admiralty's attention to a book published in Germany ten years earlier by a highly respected strategist, Admiral Wolfgang Wegener. The book emphasised the

strategic importance to Germany in any future war of seizing potential bases on the Norwegian western seaboard.<sup>28</sup> In 1939 a small, unofficial staff in the Admiralty<sup>29</sup> had been studying the implications of this, and of the trade in iron ore from the northern Swedish ore fields around Gällivare to Germany.<sup>30</sup> In summer, the ore was shipped direct from the Swedish port of Luleå, but in winter when the Gulf of Bothnia was frozen, the ore was transported by train to the Norwegian port of Narvik, thence in German freighters, avoiding British interference by using the Leads – the territorial inshore waters down the west coast of Norway. Attention had been drawn in several pre-war books to the potential for the fleet to interdict this trade.<sup>31</sup> Germany's dependence on imported iron ore had also been the subject of reports by the government's Industrial Intelligence Centre, and Churchill was already familiar with this subject as a result of the briefings he had been regularly receiving, with official sanction, from the Centre's head Desmond Morton, a close friend and neighbour.<sup>32</sup> Morton had written as early as 1937, '[W]ere Sweden alone to refuse to supply Germany with iron ore, German industry would come to a stop in a very short time, possibly measurable in weeks.'<sup>33</sup>

When Churchill and his senior staff discussed the Admiralty report on 18 September, they agreed that if diplomatic means to prevent the trade failed, 'we should be prepared to violate Norwegian territorial waters'.<sup>34</sup> There was a complicating factor. Negotiations were underway between the British and Norwegian governments for the charter by Britain of the large (and, for Britain, critically important) Norwegian merchant fleet, but these negotiations looked like they would be satisfactorily concluded in the near future. The way would then be clear for the action proposed. Churchill, enthused by the project, wasted no time. The very next day he put the idea to the War Cabinet. Having explained the overall problem, he set out his solution: If the desired result could not be attained by pressure on the Norwegian government, he would be compelled to propose a more drastic remedy, namely, the laying of mines inside Norwegian territorial waters to drive the ore-carrying vessels outside the three-mile limit, thereby opening them to attack.

What those around the table quite made of this is hard to judge. No discussion is recorded in the minutes; the Cabinet merely 'took note', and moved on.<sup>35</sup> Judging by subsequent recorded discussions, though, it is highly unlikely that their reaction was quite as Churchill reported back to the Admiralty: 'The Cabinet, including the Foreign Secretary, appeared strongly favourable to this action. It is therefore necessary to take all steps to prepare it. . . . Pray let me be continually informed of the

progress of the plan, which is of the highest importance in crippling the enemy's war industry.<sup>36</sup>

A fortnight later the War Cabinet returned to the subject, following a memorandum from Churchill calling for further plans to be made for prompt action. But the issue appeared to be overtaken by events. Halifax, no doubt to Churchill's embarrassment, reported that very little iron ore was, in fact, now being exported from Narvik, nor would there be through the winter.<sup>37</sup> The War Cabinet noted that no action would be necessary unless supplies from Narvik to Germany started moving again but agreed that, in that event, the Royal Navy would take 'drastic action'.<sup>38</sup>

And there the matter rested. But not for long.

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### The Strategy Makers

The War Cabinet was one of four levels in the higher direction of the war, and in the making of strategy. Above it, in terms of the Anglo-French Alliance, was the Supreme War Council. Modelled on the council which had proved successful in the final year of the First World War, it comprised the British and French prime ministers along with other ministers, and with military advisers in attendance, meeting on average monthly either in London or in France (usually in Paris). It was in turn served by a small standing committee, the Allied Military Committee, which lived and worked in London.

Immediately below the War Cabinet sat the Military Coordination Committee, established in October 1939.<sup>39</sup> The need for greater coordination of the three single services had been recognised for many years. Indeed, Churchill had been at the forefront of a campaign for a coordinating authority in the 1930s, resulting in the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, creating a Minister for the Coordination of Defence in 1936. Whilst giving the appearance both of decisive political action and of a necessary improvement in the nation's defences, it was a façade and a compromise. On the one hand, the Minister was enjoined to exercise day-to-day supervision of the Committee for Imperial Defence, to consult with the Chiefs of Staff, to convene and chair meetings of the Chiefs of Staff Committee as necessary and to chair the Principal Supply Officers Committee. On the other hand, he was given no department, minimal staff, and had no executive authority<sup>40</sup> – or, in A. J. P. Taylor's words, 'one room, two secretaries and no powers';<sup>41</sup> and he was specifically forbidden from weakening the authority of the service ministers. Cynicism was further fuelled by Baldwin's selection as Minister of a man with



no obvious qualification for the job - the Attorney General, Sir Thomas Inskip - prompting the unkind comment that it was '[t]he most remarkable appointment since the Emperor Caligula made his horse a consul'.<sup>42</sup> The purpose was to head off criticism that defence was uncoordinated, but without upsetting the vested interests of the services; its creation was a neat political trick, but little more than that. Inskip was succeeded in early 1939 by Lord Chatfield, who 'found it equally impossible to get things done, in spite of his vast experience in the politico-strategic field'.<sup>43</sup>

A further attempt to achieve greater coordination was the establishment in October 1939 of the Military Coordination Committee. Under Chatfield's chairmanship, it comprised the three service ministers and the Minister of Supply with the three service Chiefs of Staff acting as 'expert advisers'. The committee's remit was 'to keep under constant review on behalf of the War Cabinet the main factors of the strategic situation and the progress of operations, and to make recommendations from time to time to the War Cabinet as to the general conduct of the war'.<sup>44</sup> Again, its actual power to achieve coordination of defence was strictly limited.

Below the Military Coordination Committee sat the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The quality of advice of the three service Chiefs would play a critical role in determining the success of government strategy.

The chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee, largely by virtue of longevity in post, was the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall.<sup>45</sup> Commissioned into an infantry regiment, Newall had transferred as a captain from the Army to the Royal Flying Corps in 1914 and was posted to France. There he had been awarded the Albert Medal (the then equivalent to the George Cross) for courageously leading a party of airmen in fighting a fire in an ammunition store. From early 1915 he filled a succession of command and management appointments, ending the war as Deputy Commander of the Independent Air Force deployed in France. Thereafter, he served almost exclusively in Britain, displaying his administrative skill in important Air Ministry jobs, such as head of the Royal Air Force (RAF) Supply and Organisation. Newall became Chief of the Air Staff in 1937 at the remarkably young age of fifty-one, selected personally by the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Swinton. This came as a surprise to many who believed that there were better men for the job, notably the stronger personalities of Air Chief Marshals Hugh Dowding of Fighter Command and Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt of Bomber Command, 'both of whom', in one historian's opinion, 'were his superiors in every respect'.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 1.2 Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall  
(*National Portrait Gallery*)

An interesting pen-picture of Newall is given by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Slessor, a long-serving member of Newall's wartime staff. Given that Slessor was writing when Newall was still alive, it is necessary to read between the lines:

In spite of an outwardly self-confident manner, he was at this time actually a rather reserved and self-effacing person, who took a bit of knowing, but in whom those who did know him well had great confidence. He had more force of character than appeared on the surface, and though he would be the last man to claim great intellectual qualities, was sound, level-headed and decisive. . . . I have seldom met a man who was so good for one's morale.<sup>47</sup>

Other writers have been less kind, summing up Newall as 'a diligent office manager . . . who proved to be an inadequate head of the RAF',<sup>48</sup> or commenting that '[t]here were too many much stronger characters amongst the senior air commanders to make his tenure as CAS an entirely happy one.'<sup>49</sup> Newall had never attended staff college, either as a student or instructor, and was somewhat narrow-minded in his understanding of warfare. In the Chiefs of Staff Committee, he confined himself mostly to matters pertaining to his own service, and in Cabinet, he was punctilious in representing the views of the Committee's



Figure 1.3 Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound  
(Getty Images)

members rather than attempting to offer wider or more personal advice or take the lead.

The head of the Royal Navy, or First Sea Lord, was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound. Pound's First World War service had included a spell as naval assistant to the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir John 'Jackie' Fisher, command of a ship at the Battle of Jutland and further key staff appointments in the Admiralty. Between the wars, he had served at sea, notably as Commander-in-Chief (CinC) of the Mediterranean Fleet, and distinguished himself in several further Admiralty posts, latterly as Second Sea Lord, in charge of personnel and training. Pound was not expected to become First Sea Lord and in 1939 was due to retire.

According to one historian, Pound was an officer whose 'contemporaries judged a plodding second-rater, with a mind untroubled by large strategic visions' who came to the appointment 'only . . . because sickness, premature death and early retirements had thinned the field of choice'.<sup>50</sup> According to his biographer, 'He was not prepared for the role he had to play. . . . He took the job on because there was no-one else and he shouldered the burden as best he could.'<sup>51</sup> Pound, almost sixty-two years on appointment, was not in full health, suffering from increasingly

serious osteoarthritis and growing deafness. He was, according to a contemporary who knew him well, already 'a tired man when he became First Sea Lord'.<sup>52</sup> Pound had a reputation for imperturbability but also as a workaholic, 'the supreme centraliser',<sup>53</sup> who had 'an obsession with detail'.<sup>54</sup> An officer who served on his staff observed, '[H]e would spend hours amending, re-writing and editing his minutes'.<sup>55</sup> Pound was dedicated to the navy but with few interests outside it and with 'narrow intellectual horizons'.<sup>56</sup> An officer who had served with him at sea remarked on 'the complete absence of books in Pound's cabin'.<sup>57</sup> Within the Chiefs of Staff Committee, his contribution to debate was sparing, and he, like Newall, tended to confine himself to matters of his own service. His major challenge would be his relationship with his political master, Churchill.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) was fifty-nine-year-old General Sir Edmund Ironside. Superficially, Ironside might have appeared to be Central Casting's choice as professional head of the Army. Standing six foot four and squarely built, a former Rugby international, Army heavyweight boxer and a multilinguist to boot, 'Tiny' Ironside had had a colourful military career. As a junior officer, he had served in the Boer War, where he had been wounded three times and carried out clandestine work, dressed as a Boer; he was said to be the inspiration for John Buchan's character Richard Hannay. In the First World War, Ironside had held a number of front-line command and staff appointments, ending the war as a brigadier general with a Distinguished Service Order and six times Mentioned in Despatches. In 1919 he had commanded the Allied force in northern Russia, supporting the White Russians' fight against the Bolsheviks around Archangel, before a succession of short-term appointments heading military missions in Hungary, Turkey and Iran and surviving a plane crash in Iraq. He had then held the key appointment of Commandant of the Staff College, finding time there to write a book about the battle of Tannenberg.<sup>58</sup> In 1938 Ironside had been appointed Governor of Gibraltar, normally a pre-retirement sinecure, but had been brought back in May 1939 as Inspector of Overseas Forces. As a possible war approached, Ironside was convinced that he was supremely and uniquely qualified to be commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in time of war and that his selection was a mere formality. Indeed, he 'did not hesitate to boast . . . that he was the only officer left in the British Army who had experience of high command in war'.<sup>59</sup> The man actually chosen for this appointment, however, was the incumbent CIGS, Lord Gort. To the amazement of many, not least Ironside himself, he was chosen to be Gort's successor. Ironside was 'bitterly disappointed that



Figure 1.4 General Sir Edmund Ironside  
(Getty Images)

I am not going to command the army in the field. My great ambition. I am not suited by temperament to such a job as CIGS, nor have I prepared myself to be such.’<sup>60</sup> The appointment had been contentious within government, the more so since there was another strong candidate, Lieutenant General Sir John Dill. Ironside’s cause had received the significant support of Churchill (a friend, and something of a *confidant*),<sup>61</sup> as Hore-Belisha told Ironside.<sup>62</sup> One factor in the decision, at least for Hore-Belisha, who cared about these things, was Ironside’s relatively high public profile. As one officer observed, ‘Ironside’s appointment was very well received. He was very much in the public eye at the time.’<sup>63</sup>

There were a number of drawbacks to Ironside as a potential CIGS. He had never served in the War Office, let alone at the interface between military-strategy and policy. He was a field commander by nature, temperament and experience, who was used to a simple environment where you either received orders or gave them, rather than having to make and justify your argument, work through committees and deal with the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity that is inherent at the strategic level. He was not unintelligent, but he did not have a trained mind. One well-placed commentator described it as ‘schoolboy intelligence’, commenting that a discussion with him was very exhilarating if disorderly, ‘like sitting under Niagara Falls – or watching a cricket hop from point to point’.<sup>64</sup> The War Office’s Permanent Secretary, P. J. Grigg, waspishly observed: ‘No doubt the new incumbent had many qualities and qualifications, but precision of thought and an orderly mind were not among them. Nor did he seem to me to have much idea about running a large machine’,<sup>65</sup> describing him to a friend as ‘a frothblower’.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, Ironside’s self-confidence was

often misplaced, sometimes to the point of arrogance, and he tended to rely on instinct rather than the advice of his staff. He also found it difficult to conceal his disdain for politicians. Although he believed that he had made a very favourable first impression on the Cabinet, word got back to the War Office that 'Far from impressing the Ministers he had annoyed them very much. . . . His manner with politicians was much too brusque.'<sup>67</sup> Chamberlain thought him 'a tactless man'<sup>68</sup> and, before the year was out, was asking Hore-Belisha whether he still had confidence in his CIGS.<sup>69</sup> Ironside was also highly disadvantaged by the timing of his appointment – the first day of the war – and the fact that some of the key members of the General Staff, in particular, the Director of Military Operations and Plans,<sup>70</sup> were removed at the same time. 'I protested', Ironside recalled. 'The DMO was the man who knew all the plans. I knew nothing.'<sup>71</sup> This upheaval and its timing were quite unnecessary. As Field Marshal Montgomery later observed, 'It is almost unbelievable that such a thing should have been allowed to happen. But it did.'<sup>72</sup> One result of this was that Ironside was in at the deep end.

A more favourable view of Ironside comes from Major General Sir John Kennedy, one of his staff officers in the early months of the war; but it is worth remembering that, like Slessor's assessment of Newall, Kennedy's was made while Ironside was still alive. 'I admired him immensely. The post of CIGS was uncongenial to him, and he made no secret of the fact. But in those bogus months between September 1939 and May 1940, he had injected into our preparations for war a virility and imagination and forcefulness which would have been lacking in Whitehall but for his presence.'<sup>73</sup>

Arguably as important (if not more so) as the individual competence of the Chiefs was the effectiveness of their combination in the provision of advice and the degree to which they worked as a team.

The photograph of the happy, smiling band of brothers walking down Whitehall belies a relationship between them that, beneath the surface, was inherently tense. Nor has this been an unusual state of affairs among the service Chiefs of Staff, either before or since. For example, before the First World War it was said that General Sir William Nicholson, CIGS 1908–1912, 'possessed a visceral loathing for the navy, a feeling which Admiral Sir John Fisher [First Sea Lord] heartily reciprocated'.<sup>74</sup> According to one historian, 'In the summer of 1939 personal relations among the COS [Chiefs of Staff] were as bad as during the Beatty-Trenchard era.'<sup>75</sup> Ironside had a low opinion of Pound – 'very deaf and hardly says anything except on naval subjects'<sup>76</sup> – and later referred to 'that creature Newall' as 'a sort of buffoon with no knowledge of modern war',<sup>77</sup> recording his performance at their first meeting with the French



Figure 1.5 The Chiefs of Staff: Ironside, Newall, Pound  
(Getty Images)

Chiefs of Staff as ‘weak and unconvincing’.<sup>78</sup> The reciprocal views of Pound and Newall about Ironside are not known. In the words of another historian, ‘continual consultation among the COS had not produced a better understanding among the services; familiarity with each other’s views had bred contempt rather than compromise’.<sup>79</sup>

The basis for the tension in the Chiefs’ mutual relationship was their perspective on their individual responsibilities and loyalties. In common with many of their predecessors and successors, they saw their role and duty primarily as head of their own service and guardian of its interests, and despite having clear terms of reference about their remit to advise on defence policy as a whole, with ‘all considerations concerning Single Service being subordinated to the main object of National and Imperial Defence’,<sup>80</sup> believed that, quite to the contrary, they were doing their duty by putting the interests of their own tribe first. A running sore between the services was the competition for finite and scarce financial resources. The ‘Ten Year Rule’ – under which the armed forces were instructed to draft their estimates ‘on the assumption that the British



Empire would not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years<sup>81</sup> – may have been terminated in 1932, but strict financial stringency in defence funding remained. In the years leading up to the Second World War this competition had been particularly fierce, with successive governments keeping the services on very tight budgets – or, as the services believed, with justification, denying them the money they needed to operate effectively.

Each service manoeuvred shamelessly to secure a greater share of the funding. For example, in late 1938 the RAF had stated its case candidly:

[I]t is worth remembering that it is not enough to avoid losing a war. We have got to be able to win it. The Navy cannot win a war for us in less than a matter of years. We certainly cannot win it with an army of four or five divisions. We do not know that we can win it in the air. But a powerful air striking force seems our only means of providing a backing of immediate force behind our policy that might be effective within a reasonable time.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, the Army's leaders were engaging in more covert subterfuge, lobbying for an increase in size of a BEF by planting questions with their French opposite numbers to be asked of British ministers visiting Paris, and surreptitiously denigrating the RAF's case with the Minister for Coordination of Defence.<sup>83</sup>

All three services were badly placed to face a war, for numerous reasons that are well explained elsewhere,<sup>84</sup> but each believed that it was particularly badly placed. The Royal Navy considered that it had been starved of money at the expense of the RAF which, by 1939, was consuming more than forty per cent of the entire annual defence budget. Following the ending in 1936 of the so-called building holiday – the moratorium on the construction of new warships – the Admiralty had sought approval for an ambitious programme to achieve a 'New Standard Navy', but this had been greatly curtailed by the government. By 1939 the Admiralty had many serious concerns: a high proportion of its ships were obsolescent; the first of its new King George V-class battleships was still in construction; the Fleet was seriously short of escorts, minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels; there were 'extremely serious deficiencies' in the Fleet Air Arm; and there was an overall shortage of skilled ratings.<sup>85</sup> For its part, the RAF, despite comparatively greater investment, was, with reason, far from confident of its readiness for war against a Luftwaffe that by 1939 was numerically superior to the air forces of Britain and France put together. Bomber Command was reported by its CinC to be lacking the strength and efficiency to go to war 'within any predictable period'.<sup>86</sup> Fighter Command was equipped 'in barely adequate numbers'. And Coastal Command was not only weak in numbers but also 'almost entirely equipped with obsolescent aircraft'.<sup>87</sup>



Finally, the Army, despite vigorous protest, had been bound by the policy of 'limited liability' – the planning assumption that, in the event of war, an expeditionary force would not be sent to France. It was an assumption that suited the other two services: financial provision for the self-styled 'Cinderella of the services'<sup>88</sup> had been restricted accordingly. When limited liability came to an abrupt end in February 1939, the Army was 'faced [with] the implications of . . . transforming itself from a small professional force concerned with imperial policing into a cadre to train and command a conscript force over a million strong to take part in large-scale continental warfare'.<sup>89</sup> It viewed its unreadiness with considerable alarm, aware that it was 'desperately short of all kinds of weapons, equipment and stores',<sup>90</sup> that its armoured forces were 'desperately weak'<sup>91</sup> and that there was a grave shortage of anti-aircraft guns.<sup>92</sup> The government's decision in March to double the size of the Territorial Army and the introduction in April of limited conscription – both without preparation, planning or financial provision – caught the headlines nicely, but caused considerable confusion, and for many months, did little to improve capacity or readiness. In August, Inrside calculated that the Army was still short of more than 1,300 officers and 41,000 men.<sup>93</sup>

A further and constant bone of contention<sup>94</sup> between the services throughout the 1930s had been the role and provision of air support. The Navy and Army both believed that, to be effective, air support should be an integral part of their own organisations. Responsibility for the Fleet Air Arm had been divided between the RAF and Royal Navy in 1918, but following a long campaign by the Admiralty, and much bitter wrangling in private and in public, all but a small part was returned to the navy in 1937. Although, at working level, liaison between the Fleet Air Arm and the RAF's Coastal Command may have, as some have claimed, been 'close and effective',<sup>95</sup> this did not prevent stealthy naval predatory moves on Coastal Command, including a proposal that a number of its airfields be transferred to naval ownership. This, in turn, focussed the RAF on 'defending ourselves against ever increasing encroachments'.<sup>96</sup> One result of this toxic relationship was that in the two years preceding the outbreak of the war, the Fleet Air Arm and Coastal Command held only two joint exercises.<sup>97</sup>

The RAF was also locked into 'acrimonious debate' on the subject of air support with the Army.<sup>98</sup> The latter had increasingly seen the need for direct air support for ground forces and resented both the low priority given to the resourcing of it by the RAF and the small air component dedicated to the role. In March 1939 the CIGS, Lord Gort, had demanded a much increased air component, including bombers, and insisted that the force should be an integral part of the deployed field

force, under army control. Such a demand was anathema to the RAF, who, with good reason, doubted Army assurances that it was not seeking its own air force.<sup>99</sup> Within a fortnight of taking office, Ironside had taken up the fight with energy and bombast, ‘disgusted with the way in which the RAF treat cooperation of the Air Force with the Army’,<sup>100</sup> castigating his predecessors – ‘Each successive CIGS has funkied tackling the Air Ministry’ – and declaring his own hand: ‘I have told them that we are at war now and there can be no delay.’<sup>101</sup>

The RAF’s position on the issue of support to the other services was strictly in line with the doctrine of its founder Lord Trenchard – still, in the late 1930s, an *eminence grise*. The Trenchard doctrine, popularised by Baldwin’s assertion in 1932 that ‘the bomber will always get through. . . . The only defence is offence’,<sup>102</sup> held that the air forces should be used for long-range ‘strategic’ bombing and that other roles were a dangerous distraction and a misuse of air power. The RAF’s senior officers in 1939 spoke in unison with the voice of true disciples, and Newall, according to his Secretary of State Samuel Hoare (in 1940), ‘never wavered in his defence of the true faith’.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Newall had declared close air support to ground troops to be ‘a gross misuse of air forces’.<sup>104</sup> Evidence of the success of such support in the Spanish Civil War, and later, in German success in Poland may have caused some to have private doubts, but it did not shake their publicly declared faith. The reason was simple. If the Army was allowed to have control of its own air support, it was but a small step to the formation of its equivalent of the Fleet Air Arm and thus the dismemberment and death-knell of the RAF. Feelings ran high. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris was later to recall, ‘[F]or twenty years, I watched the army and navy, both singly and in concert, engineer one deliberate attempt after another to destroy the Royal Air Force. Time after time they were within a hair-breadth of success; time after time Trenchard, and Trenchard alone, saved us.’<sup>105</sup> For the RAF, the major existential threat seemed to be not the Luftwaffe, but the other two British services. Thus, when in March 1939 the Army produced a report on its ‘Requirements from the RAF for the Field Force’ which demanded, amongst other things, no less than thirty-nine army cooperation squadrons, twenty-four direct support squadrons and six long-range reconnaissance squadrons, it opened old wounds in the Air Ministry, causing the Director of Plans to warn Newall.

There is a regrettable revival of the old idea, which there has been some reason to think dead, that when the soldier talks about cooperation between the Air Force and the Army he really means the subordination of the Air Force to the Army.

It should be strenuously resisted ... The War Office disclaim ... any idea of an Army Air Arm, and then go on to propose an organization in which the responsibility of the Air Force is entirely confined to the production, supply and technical training. In fact, the Royal Air Force are to be manufacturers, garage proprietors and chauffeurs for the Army.<sup>106</sup>

In summary, there were considerable tensions between the service Chiefs in September 1939 – tensions that were set to get worse.

There was, thus, a hierarchy of four levels of strategic decision-making: the Supreme War Council, the War Cabinet, the Military Coordination Committee and the Chiefs of Staff Committee. But below the latter was another important part of the process: the Joint Planning Sub-Committee, or 'Joint Planners'. Advice to the Military Coordination Committee and War Cabinet from the Chiefs of Staff came in the form of written reports. The Chiefs did not, of course, write these reports themselves. As anyone who worked in the service ministries – or has worked in today's Ministry of Defence – knows, reports signed by the great men are actually written by staff officers, following direction – sometimes only very broad direction – from the Chiefs, who may then call for amendments to be made to the draft. The staff officers concerned with providing the most important policy advice are always, and for obvious reasons, very carefully selected and are invariably 'high-flyers' within their own service. This was indeed the case in late 1939 for the three officers – the Directors of Plans of each service – who made up the Joint Planners, which was the group whose function it was to write the reports or 'appreciations of the situation'. These officers were Royal Navy Captain Victor Danckwerts, an officer of 'excellent brains',<sup>107</sup> succeeded in March by Captain Charles Daniel (who would rise to the rank of full admiral); Air Commodore John Slessor (a future Chief of the Air Staff);<sup>108</sup> and Brigadier John Kennedy (later to become Assistant CIGS), succeeded in January by Brigadier Ian Playfair (later to be one of the official historians of the war).<sup>109</sup> The Joint Planners' role was to be a highly significant one. Their title, though, was something of a misnomer. As has been seen, their task was to produce reports and 'appreciations', not to produce joint operational plans. Remarkably, no organisation existed to produce the latter.

One of the first wartime tests for the strategy makers was to be posed by British policy towards Norway.