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DID LLOYD GEORGE STARVE THE BRITISH ARMY OF MEN PRIOR TO THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE OF 21 MARCH 1918?*

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On 21 March 1918 the Germans launched the first of what they hoped would be war-winning offensives. At the end of the day the defences of the British Fifth Army had been breached and the British had lost almost as much ground as they and the French had gained during the 140 days of bitter fighting during the Somme battle. Both Sir Douglas Haig, the commander-in-chief of the British forces, and the prime minister David Lloyd George were stunned. The massive and prolonged British attacks from mid-1916 onwards had failed to achieve what the Germans had accomplished in a single day. Then and later reasons were sought for this military disaster. A thread running through many of the explanations is that Lloyd George denied Haig the men necessary to defend his front.¹ According to the British official history, Haig even believed that he and his troops 'were at the mercy of an "Organizer of Defeat"'.² When King George V visited Haig in late March he was told that 'British Infantry in France at the beginning of the Battle were 100,000 less than a year ago!'. With this diminished force, Haig went on to complain, he had to defend a longer front because of an Anglo-French agreement designed to relieve the war-weary French army by extending the British front.³

Haig's charge that he had been let down by his government soon had an echo in the British press. On 8 April Charles à Court Repington, Britain's most influential (and controversial) military journalist, who had recently moved his pen from *The Times* to the *Morning Post*, asked his readers: 'Why have the reiterated demands of the Army for men remained unanswered? Who but Mr. Lloyd George is responsible

* The author wishes to express his appreciation to Professor Trevor Wilson of the University of Adelaide for his critical reading of an earlier draft of this communication. The author is of course solely responsible for any errors which remain.

¹ Typical of this view is the account found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* treatment of Lloyd George's career (1979 edition), xi, 8. Haig's infantry strength may actually be one of the least important factors in the initial breakthrough although it certainly contributed to the continued German advance when French divisions were slow in coming to the rescue. Correlli Barnett has pointed out that 'in terms of odds and of density of troops within the actual defence system, the British in March 1918 were better placed than the Germans in July 1917, who had succeeded in blunting the first British assault'. Correlli Barnett, *The swordbearers: studies in supreme command in the First World War* (London, 1963), p. 297. Other factors that played a role in the spectacular German success on 21 March are the dense fog of that day, faulty British defensive tactics (placing too many men in the first defensive line), Haig's distribution of his troops on his front (the majority being concentrated in the north near the sea where the British could not give up ground without disastrous results) and the poor condition of French fortifications inherited by the British army when it extended its line.

² *Military operations, France and Belgium, 1918*, 1, vii.

³ Haig diary, 31 Mar. 1918, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, no. 124.

for the failure to supply the Army's needs? I think that we shall have to be more ruthless towards Ministers who have failed the country and that our easy tolerance of incompetence is a public danger.'

The prime minister attempted to defend himself against this and other attacks in the press in parliament on 9 April. The British army, he asserted, was actually stronger at the beginning of January 1918 than it had been the previous January. This statement was correct in respect to ration strength. But it was misleading if Lloyd George intended to maintain that Haig had more riflemen at the beginning of 1918 than he had had at the start of 1917.

The *Morning Post* was quick to criticize the prime minister's 'fancy figures', and Sir Godfrey Baring, a member of the Liberal party, raised pointed questions about them in parliament on 18 April. Ian Macpherson, the under-secretary of state for war, responded to Baring. Using figures provided by the War Office, he asserted unequivocally that British 'combat strength' was stronger in January 1918 than in January 1917.⁴ Unfortunately, the adjutant-general's department erroneously included as part of Haig's army the 86,000 British troops which had been sent to rescue Italy after the Austro-German breakthrough at Caporetto.

The press attacks, especially in the War Office's mouthpiece, the *Morning Post*, and the rumblings in parliament made Lloyd George fear that the military authorities with whom he had been feuding over strategy were involved in a conspiracy to drive him from office by placing the blame for Haig's defeat squarely on him. Substitute men for shells and you had a menace to the government more serious than the 'shells scandal' which had rocked Asquith's ministry in 1915. On 7 May matters came to a head when Major-General Sir Frederick B. Maurice, who had recently been removed as director of military operations on the Imperial General Staff, publicly challenged the government's conduct of the war in a letter which was published in many of the morning papers. Included in his charges against the ministers was the emotional and explosive implication that the government had starved Haig of men, leaving his forces in a weakened and vulnerable state. Lloyd George's response to 'GEN. MAURICE'S BOMBSHELL', as the *Star* called it, was to inform parliament that Macpherson's recent comparison of Haig's strength at the beginning of 1917 and 1918 had been based on figures supplied to the adjutant-general by Maurice's department. What Lloyd George withheld from parliament was that the adjutant-general had just sent him new returns which put Haig's 'fighting troops' at 969,283 (excluding the Indian cavalry) in January 1918 as compared to 1,069,831 (also excluding the Indian cavalry) in January 1917.⁵

Lloyd George's duplicitous speech which seemed to destroy Maurice's credibility was a resounding success; the public and parliament were satisfied and the nation now focused its attention on stemming the German tide in France rather than seeking scapegoats for the 21 March disaster. This controversy, however, was revived following the war. Winston S. Churchill, the minister of munitions in 1918, accused Lloyd George of hoarding Britain's reserves to keep Haig from misusing them in fresh

⁴ *Morning Post*, 17 Apr. 1917, and *H. of C. Deb.*, 5th series, vol. 105 (18 Apr. 1918).

⁵ There can now be no doubt that Lloyd George misled parliament. A copy of the adjutant-general's revised returns is in the Lloyd George papers (F/235) in the House of Lords Record Office, London, and Hankey admits in his diary that Lloyd George was aware of the corrected returns when he spoke to parliament. Hankey diary, 9 May 1918, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, 1/3.

assaults. 'He [Lloyd George] sanctioned only a moderate reinforcement of the Army, while at the same time gathering in England the largest possible numbers of reserves.'⁶ Brigadier-General John Charteris, Haig's head of intelligence until December 1917, made a similar indictment in his biography of the field-marshal: 'No steps were being taken to provide the necessary manpower to keep the British Army in the field even up to defensive strength, or to provide reserves from which the inevitable gaps in the ranks during the forthcoming German attack could be filled.'⁷ Perhaps the most authoritative statement was made by Brigadier-General Sir James E. Edmonds, the compiler of the British official history. 'It is obvious', he wrote, 'that the British Armies in France could have been brought up to full establishment before 21st March without unduly weakening the forces elsewhere had the Government so willed.'⁸

Lloyd George went to great lengths to defend himself in his memoirs; and he had his supporters, most notably Maurice Hankey, the secretary of the war cabinet and the Welshman's loyal ally, whose objectivity was perhaps open to question because of his personal involvement in the government's manpower policies, and Captain Basil Liddell Hart, perhaps Britain's foremost military historian until his death, whose views were none the less suspect because of his role in the writing of Lloyd George's memoirs and his at times polemical treatment of the 'western' generals' tactics and strategy.⁹

Despite the efforts of Lloyd George and his sympathizers, most recent accounts of the German breakthrough, although they may not agree with the theory that Haig's setback was primarily caused by a shortage of men, accept the thesis that Lloyd George refused to furnish Haig with the required drafts of mobilized soldiers or fresh recruits to keep his forces up to strength. H. Essame writes that Lloyd George was 'actually holding back in England some 449,000 category A men [soldiers fit for combat] over 19 years of age'. Martin Middlebrook asserts that the prime minister reduced 'to a minimum' the flow of troops to France: 'This is why Haig's divisions were under strength and his reinforcement camps empty.' John Terraine, who through his defence of Haig has had a considerable impact on his countrymen's perception of British tactics and strategy in World War I, is especially one-sided in his treatment of Lloyd George: 'Having come to the decision not to reinforce the Army in France, in case it might be launched into another of those offensives which he so much hated, and having seen this decision place the Army in the gravest peril of the whole war, Lloyd George, both at the time, in 1918, and later, when he wrote his *War Memoirs*, bent his unusual dialectical skill to the work of obscuring the facts.' John Toland and Correlli Barnett have also pointed the finger of blame at Lloyd George for not supplying Haig with men.¹⁰

⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The world crisis*, 6 vols. (New York, 1927), iv, 94.

⁷ Brigadier-General John Charteris, *Field-Marshal Earl Haig* (New York, 1929), p. 300.

⁸ *Military operations*, 1, 52.

⁹ Lord Hankey, *Supreme command 1914-1918*, 2 vols. (London, 1961), II, 800-7, and Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, *Through the fog of war* (London, 1938), p. 273.

¹⁰ H. Essame, *The battles for Europe 1918* (London, 1972), p. 32; Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's battle 21 March 1918: the first day of the German spring offensive* (London, 1978), p. 24; John Terraine, *Ordeal of victory*, published in Britain under the title *Douglas Haig: the educated soldier* (New York, 1963), p. 391, and *Impacts of war, 1914 and 1918* (London, 1970), pp. 123, 134-47; John Toland, *No man's land: 1918 - the last year of the Great War* (Garden City, N.Y., 1980), p. 3; and Barnett, *Swordbearers*, p. 296.

New evidence now makes it possible to re-examine this serious charge against a prime minister many consider one of Britain's greatest war leaders, perhaps even the equal of Churchill and the earl of Chatham. To place this question in perspective Lloyd George's position on providing Haig with men prior to 21 March must be reviewed. In December 1916 Lloyd George became prime minister determined to implement his 'eastern' or indirect strategy. He feared that a repetition of the Somme offensive would gravely weaken the British army without decisive results. At an Allied conference at Rome in January he attempted to give the Italians the dubious honour of conducting the first major offensive of the year against the war-weary Austrians. Thwarted by British and French generals who favoured an attack in the west and the Italians who displayed no enthusiasm for assuming the major burden of attacking the enemy (even if their forces were strengthened by the addition of big guns from the Anglo-French arsenal), Lloyd George next embraced the plan of the French commander-in-chief Robert C. Nivelle who promised to rupture the German lines with an economy of losses. What especially appealed to Lloyd George was Nivelle's rash prediction of a breakthrough in twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Lloyd George believed that Nivelle's timetable would prevent a prolonged, costly and indecisive offensive. If Nivelle's offensive did not immediately rupture the enemy's front, Lloyd George hoped to switch off to another theatre where he was convinced that 'cheap' victories could be gained.

While he struggled to loosen the grip of the 'westerners' on Allied strategy, Lloyd George began to use manpower as a weapon to force Haig to make better and more economical use of his troops. A candid memorandum prepared by Hankey on 18 April 1917, two days after Nivelle launched his offensive, is clear proof of this. Hankey admitted that the war cabinet's recruiting policies were designed to keep 'the War Office short [of men] to compel the soldiers to adopt tactics that will reduce the waste of man-power... Further, they desire the War Office to work out their own salvation by a careful substitution of elderly and partially fit men and coloured men for fit men in all services behind the lines.' Another change the war cabinet hoped to impose upon Haig was the reduction of the battalions in his divisions from twelve to nine (or thirteen to ten if pioneer battalions are included). The ministers believed that the increased firepower of modern weapons would not alter the 'effective strength' of Haig's divisions even if they were numerically smaller. With no end of the war in sight, a central concern of the war cabinet was that the 'western' generals might gravely undermine Britain's ability to continue the war through the reckless depletion of her manpower in the 1917 campaign. 'The Government feel it to be more and more dangerous to mortgage the future by reducing our man-power by any drastic steps', Hankey wrote.¹¹

Despite its efforts the war cabinet would have to wait until 1918 to get Haig to accept nine-battalion divisions. The military authorities' control of the organization of the army was too great to be effectively challenged. Recruiting policies, however, were another matter. As trustees of British manpower, the civil authorities believed that they had not only a right but a duty to have the final word. Although Lloyd George had been considered an extremist on compulsion by his Liberal colleagues in the Asquith ministry, he resisted after becoming prime minister any further combing out of war-related industries, especially shipbuilding and agriculture. When the chief of the imperial general staff Sir William Robertson, after conferring

¹¹ Memorandum by Hankey, 18 Apr. 1917, P.R.O., London, CAB 63/20.

with Lloyd George in late May, informed Haig with some exaggeration that he would receive 'only scraps' in future drafts, the field-marshal's frustration boiled over: 'For the last two years most of the soldiers have realized that Great Britain must take the necessary steps to win the war by herself, because our French Allies had already shown that they lacked both the moral qualities and the means for gaining victory. It is thus sad to see the British Govt. failing at the XIIth hour!'¹² Haig's belief that Britain was 'at the XIIth hour' was at the heart of G.H.Q.'s differences with the war cabinet over manpower. Haig thought that he might defeat Germany in 1917; Lloyd George and his colleagues in the war cabinet did not. Nivelle's offensive had been a dismal failure; defeatism was rampant in Russia following the March Revolution; the Italians were showing little fight; and significant American help was in the distant future.

When Haig, who relished Britain's assuming the dominant role in the war, presented to the civilians in June and July his ambitious plan to clear the Flanders coast and smash the German army in the process, Lloyd George questioned the field-marshal's premises and passionately appealed to him not to squander British manpower in an attack that could not achieve its grandiose objectives. Pressed by Lloyd George, Haig made a commitment which he later refused to honour. 'He was fully in agreement with the Committee', he noted, 'that we ought not to push in attacks that had not a reasonable chance of success, and that we ought to proceed step by step. He himself had no intention of entering into a tremendous offensive involving heavy losses. His plan was aggressive without committing us too far.'¹³ Haig thus encouraged the notion that his attack, which proceeded by stages, could be stopped at any time if the cost seemed to outweigh the gain.

Despite pressure from his government to conform his strategy to the available supply of manpower, Haig continued his offensive long after it was obvious to almost everyone but himself that his grand strategical objectives were unobtainable. If Haig had halted his attacks in October before the rains returned to make the battlefield a quagmire, his infantry could have been kept up to strength for the opening battles of 1918. At this time, General G. E. Nevil Macready, the adjutant-general to the forces, told General H. S. Rawlinson, the commander of the Fourth Army, that he was 'fairly satisfied with the manpower' and would be able to keep the British army 'up to strength if we do not lose more than another 50,000 men before the offensive stops for the year'.¹⁴ Haig not only continued his offensive into early November, he launched another attack (the Cambrai offensive) on 20 November after some of his divisions had been sent to Italy to save that country from collapse. The end of the 1917 campaign found the British army in a bad way. In Haig's own words, 'The whole Army is therefore at present much exhausted and much reduced in strength.'¹⁵ When criticized by Churchill after the war, Haig attempted to justify the continuation of his offensive by arguing that the French commander-in-chief Philippe Pétain pressed him to continue his attacks to keep the pressure off the war-weary French.¹⁶

¹² Robertson to Haig, 26 May 1917, Haig papers, no. 113, and Haig to Robertson, 28 May 1917, Robertson papers, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King's College, University of London, 1/23/28.

¹³ Cabinet committee on war policy (9), 20 June 1917, CAB 27/6.

¹⁴ Rawlinson diary, 2 Oct. 1917, Churchill College Archives, 1/9.

¹⁵ Haig, 'Memorandum on the question of an extension of the British front', 15 Dec. 1917, M.P.C. 21, CAB 27/14.

¹⁶ Major-General Sir John Davidson, *Haig: master of the field* (London, 1953), p. 115, and Charteris, *Haig*, pp. 280-2.

This claim, however, is not supported by the evidence. Haig kept meticulous records and there is no mention in his diary or anywhere else of Pétain's having made such a request.

On 3 December when the Cambrai fighting died down, the army council, instructed by the prime minister to review the manpower situation which had been worsened by the gigantic losses of the British army in 1917, prepared a memorandum, emphasizing the dire necessity of immediately replacing Haig's losses and providing for his wastage in 1918. If this were not done, the army council warned, 'the war may well be lost' because 'of the probable release of enemy forces on the Russian front'.¹⁷

Since the high command had recently ignored Russia's collapse and advocated a continuation of the offensive, many ministers tended to believe that the army council was crying wolf. In the war cabinet, with Lloyd George absent, it was noted that 'three weeks ago, so far from there being any question of the German breaking through our lines, there had been optimistic reports regarding the deterioration in the German *moral* and the superiority of the British over their opponents, in numbers as in everything else'.¹⁸

Still, the war cabinet could not ignore the War Office's appeal for more men. A manpower committee, the fourth such committee on manpower since July 1915 was created, composed of Lloyd George, who served as chairman, and four other members of the war cabinet, Lord Curzon, George N. Barnes, J. C. Smuts and Sir Edward Carson. With Britain running out of fit men, the dilemma facing the manpower committee, as expressed by Hankey, 'was to avert a military catastrophe without plunging us into an economic catastrophe equally fatal to the cause of the Allies'.¹⁹ The civilians now believed that victory had been pushed further into the future. They wanted Haig to economize his losses in 1918 by maintaining an active defence while American troops flowed across the Atlantic, giving the Allies the necessary military muscle to defeat the German army in 1919 or 1920. Meanwhile, food must be grown, ships built to transport American divisions to France, and poison gas shells, tanks and airplanes produced as an alternative to human wave attacks to break the stalemate. Furthermore, British finances depended upon the health of British industry; and economic collapse might release a tidal wave of defeatism across the country.

The military authorities, although they were given ample opportunity to present their case for more men, could not convince the civilians to meet their request for the withdrawal of 600,000 category 'A' men from civil life by November 1918.²⁰ The general staff correctly argued that even if the British stood on the defensive they could not count on reducing their wastage if the Germans made a bid for victory through British trenches. But many civilians believed that the Germans would not repeat the 'mistakes' of Haig by throwing their men away against machine guns and barbed

¹⁷ Memorandum by Derby, 3 Dec. 1917, Army Council (239), 3 Dec. 1917, WO 163/22, P.R.O.

¹⁸ War cabinet (293), 6 Dec. 1917, CAB 23/4.

¹⁹ Hankey, 'Note by the Secretary', 8 Dec. 1917, M.P.C. 2, CAB 27/14.

²⁰ Much has been made about the fact that no member of the manpower committee had military experience (unless General Smuts is counted) and its alleged failure to call upon the general staff for advice. Lieutenant-General Sir George M. W. Macdonogh, the director of military intelligence, Maurice, General Sir C. F. Nevil Macready, the adjutant-general to the forces, and other military authorities (Robertson was not among them), however, were called before this committee to give evidence.

wire. Haig himself reinforced this view by expressing the opinion in January that the Germans were likely to adopt a policy of limited attacks in the west in 1918.²¹ Another problem for the military authorities was their history of dubious accounting to justify their policies. Hankey expressed a widely held civilian view when he noted in his diary that the War Office's figures and statements were 'utterly unreliable, as their facts are twisted to support their arguments'.²²

During the discussion of the army's requirements, the War Office's manipulation of statistics did nothing to alter the civilians' distrust. In an attempt to reconcile different tables provided by the adjutant-general and the minister for national service, the civilians discovered that the military authorities had exaggerated Haig's anticipated deficit in men by the fall of 1918 and underestimated his potential reserves by earmarking all the drafts available to him at the beginning of 1918 to theatres other than France because of the practice of sending only men over twenty years old to the outlying theatres. In the event of a crisis in the west in early 1918, Smuts pointed out, Britain would have on hand 'a large unexpended proportion of the men intended for theatres other than France, although such balance would not be shown by his [adjutant-general's] estimates above referred to'.²³

The war Office's fluctuating view of Haig's true 'fighting' strength is another revealing illustration of its questionable use of statistics. The ration strength of Haig's forces increased by about twenty per cent from the beginning of 1917 to the beginning of 1918. But the 1918 numbers were inflated by the addition of a labour corps of approximately 300,000 men which did not exist until mid-1917. That the labour corps, of which over half were coloured (98,574) or prisoners of war (69,720) at the beginning of 1918, should be separated from the 'fighting' troops is beyond question. But as we are about to see in the following three sets of figures the War Office did more than this. In February 1918 the adjutant-general prepared a memorandum on British forces in France that showed that Haig's 'fighting' or 'combatant' troops on 8 January 1917 were 1,192,688 (including about 60,000 transportation workers) as compared to 1,097,906 (excluding transportation workers) on 5 January 1918. If the approximately 60,000 transportation workers (who were apparently counted as Royal Engineers prior to mid-1917) are subtracted from the 1917 figure, the comparison between January 1917 and January 1918 is 1,132,688 to 1,097,906, a decline of around three per cent.²⁴ In April 1918 Macpherson, relying on figures supplied by the War Office, told parliament that Haig's 'combatant' strength was 1,253,000 on 1 January 1917 and 1,298,000 on 1 January 1918.²⁵ Macpherson's figures, of course, incorrectly included 86,000 troops which had been sent to Italy. When corrected Haig's 'combatant' strength at the beginning of 1918 was down 41,000 men from the previous year. As criticism of the government's manpower policies mounted, however, the War Office substantially altered the figures supplied to Macpherson by making a dubious distinction between 'fighting' and 'non-fighting' (which included tank drivers, machine gunners, etc.) troops. On

²¹ War cabinet (316 A), 7 Jan. 1917, CAB 23/13. When told by Lord Derby, the secretary of state for war, and Robertson how damaging his statement was to the War Office's efforts to pry more men out of the civilians, Haig reversed himself. But it was too late. The civilians had heard what they wanted to hear.

²² Hankey diary, 6 Dec. 1917, 1/3.

²³ Memorandum by Smuts, no date but written in mid-Jan. 1918, M.P.C. 30, CAB 27/14.

²⁴ *Military operations, Appendices*, Appendix 7.

²⁵ War cabinet (407), 8 May 1918, CAB 23/6.

the eve of the Maurice debate, with his ministry in jeopardy, Lloyd George was furnished returns by the adjutant-general which pictured Haig's position in the worst possible light. His January 1918 'fighting' strength was put at 969,283, down 100,000 men from his January 1917 'fighting' strength of 1,069,831.²⁶ One is reminded of Disraeli's acid comment that there are 'lies, damned lies and statistics'. This does not excuse Lloyd George for suppressing the most recent War Office returns in the Maurice debate, but he can be forgiven for believing that he was faced with a military conspiracy to destroy his government.

What is not in dispute is that the manpower committee chose to provide the army with only 100,000 category 'A' men from civil life to maintain the overseas forces in 1918. The navy, air force, shipbuilding, food production and even timber-felling were given a higher priority than the field forces. The civilians believed that the Germans, even if they attempted an all-out assault, did not have the necessary superiority in numbers to win the war, especially with American troops beginning to assume some of the burden of fighting the German army during the last half of 1918. In calculating the risks, they thought it more prudent to protect the nation's staying power than to exhaust the nation's slim reserves of manpower. Still, it is obvious that Haig could have been provided with more recruits if the civilians had so willed. That they did not do so is explained by more than their desire to hold back men to build ships, dig coal and maintain civilian morale on the home front. Lloyd George and others feared that Haig, who commanded the best army in the anti-German coalition, would resume at the first opportunity his blood-draining attacks if he were given a *carte blanche* for all able-bodied civilians. As Lloyd George told Lord Esher, who conducted valuable intelligence work for the British in France, before the manpower committee began its deliberations: 'Now he [Haig] wrote of fresh offensives, and asked for men. He would get neither. He had eaten his cake, in spite of warnings. Pétain had economised his.'²⁷

In defence of the civilians, it must be pointed out that the army's demand that 600,000 category 'A' men be drafted by November 1918 was unrealistic. When the massive German attacks in 1918 compelled the government to increase dramatically its recruiting, combing out men from the vital occupations, only 372,330 category 'A' men could be found from all sources from January to November 1918.²⁸ Moreover, if the government had acquiesced in the army's demand for 250,000 recruits immediately, these new soldiers could not have been trained in time to be of assistance by 21 March.

The government's position on recruiting must be carefully separated from one of the most enduring myths of the war: that Lloyd George refused to reinforce Haig's army from the 449,000 category 'A' men who were available as overseas drafts in 1918. Often repeated, this version has become part of the folklore of the war. Unfortunately it is also a subject which must be discussed in view of statistics which can easily be misused or misunderstood. The military authorities' system of classifying men from categories 'A' to 'E' according to their fitness and availability has contributed to the confusion. The French, who did not have a similar

²⁶ P. de B. Radcliffe to Kerr (adjutant-general's statement, 7 May 1918, enclosed), 8 May 1918, Lloyd George papers, F/235.

²⁷ Esher diary, 1 Dec. 1917, Churchill College Archives, 2/20.

²⁸ *Statistics of the military effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920* (London, 1922), pp. 371-4.

classification system, viewed this British arrangement with considerable scepticism. 'A mere sailor's notion', was Georges Clemenceau's contemptuous comment.²⁹

Many military historians have lost their bearings in the labyrinth of War Office tables, including the very able Correlli Barnett, who has written that 'Haig had hoped to make good his own [losses] from the still copious reserves of fit young manpower in the United Kingdom – 607,403 trained "A" men on January 1, 1918... However, instead of the 605,000 men he demanded, he was promised only 100,000'.³⁰ A more muddled statement would be hard to imagine. Barnett confused the 100,000 men the civilians decided to withdraw from civil life with the men already mobilized in Great Britain. The figure of 607,403 men he refers to were the men (exclusive of the Australian, Canadian and other overseas contingents) who were considered 'available' for overseas duty. But 385,802 of these men were classified category 'B' (fit for service abroad but not for general service). Another 50,026 of this grand total were category 'A(iv)', lads under nineteen years of age who were not at this time being sent overseas. It is true that an examination of the War Office returns of January reveals that there were an additional 278,493 category 'A' men who were classified as 'unavailable'. But this was not a machiavellian ploy to deny the overseas forces reinforcements. Those considered 'unavailable' by the War Office were primarily recruits in training, lads under age or returned expeditionary force men who would be fit for combat when 'hardened'.³¹ The military authorities concluded that for all of 1918 there would be available as drafts approximately 449,000 uniformed 'A' men (many of whom, of course, were trained and attached to arms other than the infantry). Most of these men, it must be stressed, could not immediately be utilized overseas because they were still in training or under age.

The eyebrows of more than one observer have been raised by War Office returns which show in January 1918 that there were in Great Britain 1,483,693 men in khaki (or 1,675,251 if Dominion or overseas contingents are included).³² The uninformed, who included the French premier Clemenceau,³³ have accused the British of maintaining a vast secret army at home. Exclusive of overseas contingents, only about one third of this total were 'A' men available as drafts for the overseas forces in 1918 and, as shown above, many of them in January 1918 were not classified as '(i)': 'Men actually fit for despatch overseas in all respects, as regards training, physical and mental qualifications.' Another 578,709 men of all ranks were classified as category 'B' men, whose number had been substantially increased by the elimination of category 'C' ('fit for service at home only') in late 1917. Others were in permanent cadre, awaiting discharge or reclassification or temporarily unfit for service in either categories 'A' or 'B'.³⁴

That Britain did not have a secret pool of fit men is demonstrated by the extreme measures considered by the war cabinet after 21 March. Men were to be withdrawn

²⁹ Georges Clemenceau, *Grandeur and misery of victory*, Eng. trans. (London, 1930), p. 96.

³⁰ Barnett, *Swordbearers*, p. 296.

³¹ *Statistics of the military effort*, pp. 115, 123.

³² Throughout 1917, the number of troops at home (including the overseas contingents or Dominion forces) remained in the neighbourhood of 1,700,000. The lowest was 1,664,366 in July and the highest was 1,748,602 in January. *Ibid.* pp. 31–3, 115, 123.

³³ See, for example, Clemenceau's comments during an Anglo-French conference on 1 June 1918, CAB 28/3/IC. 63B.

³⁴ *Statistics of the military effort*, pp. 115, 123.

from the munitions industry, coal mines and dockyards; conscription for Ireland was contemplated, a most questionable source for recruits, for H. E. Duke, the chief secretary for Ireland, told the war cabinet that it 'might as well recruit Germans'; Royal Marines were to be taken from the navy; Russians living in Britain were to be recruited for labour battalions; the test for eyesight was to be lowered for category 'A' men; and even the recall of wounded who had been discharged was contemplated, along with the despatch of conscientious objectors and clergymen to France.³⁵ Most of these extraordinary proposals, it must be noted, were never implemented.

The official record indicates that Lloyd George did not hold back men already mobilized from the British Expeditionary Force. On the contrary, he took the lead in finding reinforcements for Haig. During the manpower discussions, he told the military authorities 'that it was most desirable that as many men as could be spared from the Home Defence should be sent to France to relieve the men who had been fighting from the duty of manning the trenches on the fronts that were not actually heavily-engaged battle fronts'.³⁶ Many of the men in the home defence forces, Britain's last line of defence after the navy, were, however, not category 'A'.³⁷ General Sir A. Paget told Repington in January that 'the men lining the beach were cripples, all B and C men, and that the mobile reserve behind were largely boys of 18 to 19, very keen good boys, but impressionable and partially trained, with bad officers'.³⁸ Paget's reference to 'cripples' was typical of the British military hierarchy's view of men below category 'A'.³⁹ With all the European belligerents short of young and fit men, the civilians were convinced that the military authorities were not doing all that could be done to find front-line troops among the large number of soldiers mobilized.⁴⁰ The manpower committee concluded in mid-

³⁵ War cabinet (372, 375-6), 25, 27-8 Mar. 1918, CAB 23/5.

³⁶ Cabinet committee on manpower (4), 15 Dec. 1917, CAB 27/14.

³⁷ With the Admiralty unable to reject the possibility that the German navy might be able to transport a sizeable force to the British Isles, the military authorities took the threat of a German invasion very seriously. See Robertson, 'Troops required for Home Defence', Cabinet paper G.T. 3212 of 3 Jan. 1918, CAB 24/38.

³⁸ Lieut.-Col. C. à Court Repington, *The First World War 1914-1918*, 2 vols. (London, 1921), II, 172.

³⁹ The British official history is contemptuous of the government's attempts to render 'a larger proportion of the Army available for first-line duty', arguing that since 'the ancillary services had already been "combed" many times' it was 'not worth consideration'. *Military operations, Appendices*, Appendix 7. With all continental forces desperately short of good men during the winter of 1917-18, this elitist view was questionable to say the least. An important reason for the formation of the hand-picked storm trooper units for the 21 March offensive was the serious deterioration of the overall quality of the German army.

⁴⁰ In July, Lloyd George told the war cabinet that four departments in addition to a French officer Colonel Roure, whom Lloyd George had invited to investigate Britain's utilization of manpower to mollify Clemenceau, had criticized the army's use of mobilized men. Roure, in fact, argued that from 200,000 to 300,000 more combatants could be combed from the men already in uniform. 'We could not continue', Lloyd George thundered, 'taking men from industries and practically raising a mutiny in this country in the rural districts, and among the tribunals until we were convinced that the best use was being made of the men we had taken.' Milner, who was now the secretary of state for war, admitted that France got a greater proportion of its soldiers into the front lines. But he rightly emphasized the difference between the organization of an army fighting on its own soil with 'quiet' sectors and one fighting in a foreign land with an active front. See Roure's report and Milner's response in Cabinet paper G.T. 5277 of no date, CAB 24/59, and Cabinet paper G.T. 5532 of 28 Aug. 1918, CAB 24/62. Also see war cabinet (449), 19 July 1918, CAB 23/7, and 'X' Committee (21), 16 July 1918, CAB 23/17.

December that 'most of the other nations are utilising men corresponding to categories below our class "A"'. Consequently the army council was requested 'to work out some scheme of relief for the British Expeditionary Force from the Home Defence Forces'.⁴¹ From January to March 1918, Haig was sent 174,379 men (when 32,384 Dominion forces and 7,359 labour and non-fighting troops are included).⁴² Also a British division from Italy was returned to Haig's command, making the total of his reinforcements some 190,000 men. A majority of these men, however, were not front-line riflemen. Some were 'B' category, whom Haig held in contempt, and many others were assigned to arms other than the infantry where Haig remained short. The allocation of men to other arms, it must be stressed, was the decision of the War Office and not the civilians, and it must bear some of the responsibility for Haig's deficit in infantry.

Haig's shortage in infantry could have been made up if the mobile reserves (which were nine-tenths infantry) had been dispatched to France before 21 March. The general staff, rather than the war cabinet, took the initiative in retaining these men at home. Assured by Haig that he could contain any German attack for eighteen days, the general staff recommended that the mobile reserves be held back. The military authorities believed: '(i) that it would be better concealed there from the enemy's intelligence... (ii) that it would better conserve the morale of the nation suffering from the effect of Passchendaele... (iii) that these men would be spending their money at home instead of in a foreign country, thus helping the economic situation.'⁴³

Incredibly Haig actually weakened his defences by sending 88,000 men home on leave on the eve of the German offensive which was now anticipated by G.H.Q. Although these soldiers certainly needed and deserved rest, it is curious that Haig did not cancel their leave with a German attack almost a certainty. Following the German breakthrough, the mobile reserves, men on leave and 18,000 trained men available as drafts up to 20 April, constituting a force of 212,000 men, was rushed across the Channel to Haig.⁴⁴

In conclusion, the answer to the question, 'Did Lloyd George starve the British army of men prior to the 21 March offensive?', must be examined in two parts: recruiting, and the utilization of men already in uniform. It is true, as Robertson and others have claimed, that Lloyd George and his colleagues in the war cabinet refused to provide Haig throughout 1917 with all the recruits they could have withdrawn from civil life. Believing that victory was in the distant future, the civilians sought to preserve Britain's staying power. But more than this was involved. Manpower policy was used as a weapon in an unsuccessful attempt to force upon Haig less costly tactics and a more cautious strategy during the second half of 1917. This policy came to grief in the mud of Flanders. Haig, believing that he could rout the German forces, persisted in his costly Passchendaele offensive and then launched a further assault at Cambrai, leaving his army depleted and exhausted. Lloyd George, who was understandably horrified by the growing casualty lists, must share some of the responsibility for the condition of the British army because he refused either to replace Haig's losses with substantial new recruits or to order him to stop

⁴¹ Manpower committee's 'Draft Report', 15 Dec. 1917, M.P.C. 14, CAB 27/14.

⁴² *Military operations*, I, 52, note 1. The British contribution to all expeditionary forces from January to March rose from 2,077,767 to 2,259,571. *Statistics of the military effort*, pp. 34-7.

⁴³ This is the statement of an officer on the general staff in 1917-18. 'Talk with Colonel C. Allanson', 19 Aug. 1937, Liddell Hart papers, Liddell Hart Military Archives, 11/1937/69.

⁴⁴ War cabinet (372), 25 Mar. 1918, CAB 23/5.

his costly attacks. At the conclusion of the 1917 campaign, Lloyd George, supported by the war cabinet, continued his indirect policy of using manpower to control Haig. The flow of men from civil life to the army was further reduced. The war cabinet saw no hope of victory in 1918 and it feared that if Haig were not restrained the British army would be reduced to a third-rate fighting force with a parallel loss of British prestige and influence within the anti-German coalition. Events on the battlefield, however, made it unnecessary to protect Britain's slim reserves of manpower beyond 1918. To the surprise of the war cabinet, the British army was able to play the leading role in the defeat of the German army in 1918 after General Erich Ludendorff used up his reserves in a desperate gamble for victory.

As for the second part of this question, the employment of men already mobilized, the evidence makes it apparent that Lloyd George was not guilty of hoarding men in uniform in late 1917 and early 1918. He, in fact, had to prod the War Office to find reinforcements for Haig from the home defence forces. The mobile reserves were retained in Britain on the recommendation of the general staff. It is significant that Robertson, who had many axes to grind with Lloyd George, never accused him of denying Haig reinforcements from the pool of mobilized men in Great Britain.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Sir William Robertson, *From private to field-marshal* (Boston, 1921) and *Soldiers and statesmen 1914-1918* (New York, 1926), 2 vols.