

"Auxillium ab Alto" - The Royal Navy Executive Branch and the Experience of War

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L'expérience de la Grande Guerre a été traumatisante pour ceux qui se sont battus dans les tranchées et elle a sérieusement ébranlé plusieurs institutions en place. Il en a été de même pour le commandement de la Marine royale. Le leadership de la Marine a été exposé à une crise de confiance amplifiée par l'érosion de l'appui de la population et de l'appui politique. Les attentes de rapides victoires navales ont été anéanties par l'expérience de Jylland et par l'expérience de la guerre sous-marine. La crise a abouti à la destitution de l'Amiral Sir John Jellicoe de l'amirauté en décembre 1917.

War is not a very exhilarating business when we have no confidence in the high command.²

I am getting in the habit of writing perhaps more freely than I ought to. I write in haste, sometimes with no knowledge of a situation beyond our own view of it, so if I write too much please make allowance for my Celtic temperament. I know that you will use them, as I write them, only for the good of the Service - or rather for the good of the Country, which comes before the Service.³

In his February 1914 critique of the Slade Report on the Naval War College, Lieutenant-General Douglas Haig expressed deep unease with the capacity of the Admiralty to direct major combat operations. Indeed, he concluded arguing that while proposed reforms in the report were being implemented, "...we should, presumably, be careful to steer clear of any

¹ "Help from upon High," motto of H.M.S. *Kellett*, E.C. Talbot-Booth, *The Royal Navy: Some Account of Her Manners, Customs and Privileges* (London, 1942), 513.

² K.G.B. Dewar to Richmond, 8 June 1916, K.G.B. Dewar Papers, National Maritime Museum (NMM), DEW 33.

³ R. Plunkett to Richmond, 18 December 1914, H. W. Richmond Papers, NMM, RIC 7/4.

wars."⁴ Yet barely six months later the country was engaged in the greatest conflict in its history.

Unfortunately for the officer corps, Haig's ominous assessment was accurate. Even though the navy was largely successful in the execution of its strategic tasks in securing maritime communications, it was a near run thing. Indeed, in the crucial year of 1917 the Admiralty seemed paralysed in the face of unrestricted submarine warfare. All the preparations before the war, including the construction of the Grand Fleet's dreadnoughts, seemed futile. The Admiralty's apparent incapacity to use existing naval assets in an effective manner, its apparent inability to defend British commerce on the high seas, and its apparent administrative and operational incompetence also triggered a crisis of confidence. This lack of trust in the capacity of the Admiralty and its staff to conduct operations was expressed in the press and through the war cabinet. However, most seriously of all, the Admiralty lost the effective confidence of comparatively junior executive officers. This culminated in the embarrassing dismissal of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, arguably the most distinguished officer on the active list, from his post as first sea lord in December 1917.⁵

The war provided an even more severe test for the officer corps than the rough and tumble of reform in the decade prior to 1914. The argument that naval officers, by virtue of a lifetime of service, were uniquely qualified to exercise the power of command had long provided the trump card that kept interlopers away from professional matters. Not only had officers been trained "scientifically" in the use of the technical means of sea power but also by virtue of historical principles they understood the ends of such power wielded on behalf of the community.⁶ Officers of the executive branch jealously guarded their responsibility for the complicated new technology by which they would fight their ships, and by which they expected to defeat enemy attempts to challenge British naval supremacy. Their status and power, assured as it was in 1914, would be consolidated by the successful achievement of that aim. Unfortunately for them, the naval war would prove, in many respects, a grave disappointment. Thus the Royal Navy, the indispensable underwriter of empire, had built up expectations that it failed to meet when put to the test of war. This led to recrimination, not only in the press and the political arena, but within the naval profession itself, and it shook national confidence in the institution.

First of all, the expectations by officers and the general public of a quick and decisive campaign were dashed when the crucial clash did not come, and the battle that was fought nearly two years later off Jutland had unsatisfactory results. The dreadnoughts were also powerless to halt the submarine campaign that nearly strangled the British war effort.

⁴ Notes on the Report of the Slade Report by Douglas Haig, February 1914. Chartwell Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, Archives Centre (CCAC), CHAR 13/26. See also John Terraine, "The Training of Naval Officers: Lord Haig's Notes on the Report of the Committee on the Naval War College, 1913," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution (RUST)*, CIX (1964), 362.

⁵ See S.W. Roskill, "The Dismissal of Admiral Jellicoe," in W. Laqueur and G.L. Mosse (eds.), *1914: The Coming of the First World War* (New York, 1966).

⁶ The "scientific" education and training of naval officers had been a minor pre-occupation in the half century before 1914. An entire series of Admiralty committees from the 1870 Shadwell Committee to the Custance Committee of 1913 had attempted to ensure officer education was meeting the needs of a modern navy.

Moreover, in the opening months of the war, Jellicoe was compelled to shift the "all-powerful" Grand Fleet around the British Isles because its bases were not secure. The Dardanelles campaign and a host of other blunders exposed the incompetence of many officers, several of whom had been identified as top-flight flag officers prior to 1914.⁷

Moreover, the administrative and command arrangements in the Admiralty were inadequate to deal with the realities of modern warfare. While organizing and fighting a major war, the Admiralty was constantly restructured to meet growing and shifting demands. This situation was complicated by constant changes in leadership on the political and professional levels, as the navy went through four cabinet ministers and five first sea lords between October 1914 and December 1917.⁸ Even more critical than those changes, the executive officer corps effectively lost control of the agenda at the Admiralty as administrative changes, especially in the critical year of 1917, were imposed by the war cabinet. Further, one of the highest professional administrative posts on the Board of Admiralty, the third sea lord and controller, was given to a civilian railway executive, Sir Eric Geddes, who was granted the rank of vice-admiral by special order-in-council.⁹ Later in 1917 Geddes became first lord and set about reorganizing the Admiralty in defiance of the opinion of its professional members. The constant changes in Admiralty command organization also did little to inspire confidence. As Arthur Pollen remarked, the naval war seemed to lurch from one crisis to the next. Each seemed to result in a change in either the post of first lord or first sea lord and sent public and political confidence even lower.¹⁰

The reason for the loss of confidence was that the professional leadership of the navy had failed, or was perceived to have failed, in the execution of its core function: the exercise of command at sea. The navy failed tactically at Jutland, strategically at the Dardanelles, and most seriously was unable to deal with the menace of German submarines. In 1917 the leadership of the officer corps had lost the initiative in the organization of the command function in the Admiralty and effectively lost the political battle in Whitehall." Professional expertise that was supposed to be ensured by tighter regulation, higher educational qualifications, courts martial and finally a professional review, were exposed as hollow. This left a group of mid-grade officers who had been aware of many of the defects before the war profoundly frustrated, and as they were deprived of a means to influence policy.

⁷ Rear-Admiral Ernest Troubridge, a former chief of staff at the Admiralty, was tried by court martial for cowardice in the face of the enemy, a capital charge, for the escape of the German battle cruiser *Goeben* in August 1914. Vice-Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, a former director of the War College, was disgraced by the loss of the battleship *Formidable* in the Channel in the early morning hours of 1 January 1915. Bayly was, however, rehabilitated and served with distinction as commander-in-chief at Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland later in the war.

⁸ The holders of the post of first lord in this period were: Winston Churchill, Arthur Balfour, Edward Carson and Eric Geddes. First sea lords included Prince Louis of Battenberg, John Fisher, Thomas Jackson, John Jellicoe and Wester Wemyss.

⁹ Order-in-council granting vice-admiral rank to Sir Eric Geddes, 1917, The National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office, Kew, (TNA), Admiralty Papers (ADM) 1/8489/122.

¹⁰ Arthur H. Pollen, "Four Years of Naval War," *Land and Water*, 8 August 1918.

" Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Age of Fisher, 1904-1919*, 5 vols, (London, 1959-1974), IV:213-224; and A. Temple Patterson, *Jellicoe*, (London, 1969), 184-189.

The Admiralty also lost the confidence of powerful sections of the press, in particular the Northcliffe papers, such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, as well as commentators, such as Arthur Pollen, who co-edited *Land and Water*.¹² As the war was brought home with the institution of rationing in 1917, the Admiralty was subjected to unprecedented scrutiny in everything from strategy to promotion rules and organization. Unused to dealing with the press and impatient with publicity, Jellicoe had no effective response and lacked Fisher's skill at feeding information to favoured correspondents. Indeed, the Admiralty attempted to censor Pollen, and Jellicoe obtained a legal opinion on whether a libel suit could be levelled against the *Daily Mail*.¹³

Finally and perhaps most seriously, the Admiralty effectively lost the confidence of many officers in the fleet, especially the intellectuals centred on Herbert Richmond.¹⁴ These officers were not shy about using their press and political contacts to push structural reforms that they believed necessary. With the tacit support of more senior officers, including David Beatty, they felt justified in going outside the chain of command. In Richmond's words, "I hate this slavish habit of naval officers & this false idea of loyalty, which is generally not loyalty at all, but cowardice."¹⁵

When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, the Royal Navy was already mobilized. Many naval officers seemed rather mystified at the immediate causes of the war, as Midshipmen Harold Hickling later related in his autobiography: "I had never heard of the Archduke nor did I know where Sarajevo was... All sorts of heads of state, crowned or otherwise, had been bumped off but no one had gone to war about it... [S]oon ultimatums were being handed round the chancelleries of Europe like writs during a Wall Street slump."¹⁶ Still, for the most part the executive branch welcomed the war in the belief that a quick and decisive victory in the North Sea would remove the German threat. In this estimation they were not alone, since the general public expected that modern technology and efficient mobilization would quickly ensure victory.¹⁷

¹² Pollen was a particular bitter critic in the aftermath of Jutland where, he argued, the navy's failure to adopt his fire control system had resulted in tactical defeat. See Jon Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston, 1989).

¹³ Correspondence of Geddes, October 1917, TNA, ADM 116/1805. See also Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 11:223-225.

¹⁴ Barry Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 1871-1946* (Waterloo, ON, 1982), 25-39; James Goldrick, "The Irresistible Force and the Immovable Object: *The Naval Review*, the Young Turks, and the Royal Navy, 1911-1931," in James Goldrick and John B. Hattendorf (eds.), *Mahan is not Enough: The Proceedings of a Conference on the Works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond* (Newport, RI, 1993), 83-102; and Donald Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (Chicago, 1968), 127-129.

¹⁵ Arthur Marder (ed.), *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London, 1952), 237, diary entry, 13 March 1917.

¹⁶ Harold Hickling, *Sailor at Sea* (London, 1965), 15.

¹⁷ See for example, "Waiting for the Sea Fight," *Daily Mail*, 6 August 1914. "All yesterday London was waiting to know what might be happening in the North Sea. Men and women would stop at their work to sketch little maps and talk eagerly of the probable disposition of the fleets. On the marble-topped tables of restaurants the same maps would be found - clumsy outlines of the coasts of Britain, Holland, Denmark and Norway."

All the navalist propaganda which had been force-fed to the nation over the previous two decades, along with a facile reading of Mahan, created expectations of a rapid campaign that would result in the fleet destroying its opposite number in pitched battle. The problem, as Wolfgang Wegener wrote after the war, was that the North Sea was strategically dead once both the British and the Germans stood on the strategic defensive.¹⁸ By controlling the exits of the North Sea at Dover and Scapa Flow, the RN effectively cut off German maritime communications without battle.

Not only had the officer corps failed to educate the general public that naval victories were not merely won but required work, it also failed to educate itself about the ends of naval power. When the great sea battle failed to materialize and the Grand Fleet spent most of its time riding at anchor or conducting periodic sweeps, it was profoundly disappointing. Frustration was rife in both the Grand and Battle Cruiser Fleets over the inaction. It did not take long to blame someone for the trouble, as David Beatty wrote to his wife in September 1914: "This roaming about the North Sea day after day with no prospect of meeting an enemy vessel I think is the heaviest trial that could be laid on any man, added to the which the anxiety of the mine or submarine always present provides a situation which requires the highest forms of philosophy to compete with, to prevent it from clouding one's judgement. Here have I the finest striking force in world, 6 Battle Cruisers and 6 Light Cruisers, and for all we can do, they might be Thames barges."¹⁹ Public frustration grew as the army fought while the navy seemed to be floating aimlessly awaiting the appearance of the High Seas Fleet. In late November, Roger Keyes vented his spleen over public expectations. "People won't realize, though we all do, that we may take a real knock in one place without being able to inflict much loss in return. Dorothy says quite a lot of people say - Pity the Navy isn't doing better - Where would we be without it!"²⁰ Once the fleet had gone to its war stations, the High Seas Fleet did not come out to fight and German communications were cut, there was the constant urge to use British naval strength for some offensive purpose.²¹

As an operations centre, the Naval Staff was unequal to the task of co-ordinating the war. Indeed, as soon as the war broke out it ceased to carry out its functions as laid down in the orders-in-council that had established it. The sea lords became heads of department, and co-ordination between those departments became increasingly difficult. As the Dardanelles Commission concluded in 1917, the function of the board was relegated to the background when it met with decreasing frequency after the outbreak of the conflict.²²

The mobilization of the entire stock of British resources to prosecute the Great War

¹⁸ Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (1929, reprint, Annapolis, MD, 1989), 37.

¹⁹ W.S. Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David, Earl Beatty* (London, 1951), 176.

²⁰ Paul Halpern (ed.), *The Keyes Papers*, (London: Navy Records Society, 1972), 1:53, Keyes to his wife, 21 November 1914.

²¹ Jellicoe referred to such pressure as "the six monthly agitation for a naval offensive." Patterson, *Jellicoe*, 185.

²² Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers (*BPP*), "First Report of the Dardanelles Commission," 431. While in 1913 the board met twenty-four times, between August 1914 and May 1915 it met only twelve times, and in November 1915 a collective minute to the first lord (then Arthur Balfour) by the junior members of the board expressed discontent with the dominant position of the first lord and first sea lord.

exposed the War Office and the Admiralty to complex and difficult problems. Not the least of these was the recruitment, training and integration of hundreds of thousands of hostilities-only ratings and officers. From baseline strength of just under 150,000 men, the navy had expanded to over 400,000 by the end of the war, yet significantly only 188,000 were regular service personnel.²³ Even essential services, such as the education of young officers, were disrupted and led to the dispatch of these officers to the University of Cambridge after 1918.²⁴ The discipline of young midshipmen was unevenly supervised, leading to the runaway growth of bullying and other forms of abuse.²⁵

With the large wartime requirement for personnel, standards of discipline and deference to regular officers declined. This was particularly the case with reserve and hostilities-only personnel, who accounted for the tremendous increase in courts martial against commissioned officers during the war years.²⁶ Further, in the case of many reserve officers dealing with the naval service, familiarity with the workings of the regular executive branch bred contempt and intense criticism.²⁷ In defence of their privileges, particularly in the junior ranks, officers were more careful of their status; service in auxiliary squadrons was to be avoided.²⁸

Executive command was exercised through the war staff group that Churchill established at the outbreak of war. Its membership included the first lord, first sea lord, chief of staff and Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson. This group had no real organization and tended to reflect the personality of Churchill. Hence, command decisions were effectively separated from both the board and the Naval Staff. Every single member of the war group, save Churchill, were generally unenthusiastic about the staff system. Fisher, despite his frequent advocacy for a staff system, thought it excellent for everyone but himself.²⁹ Henry Oliver, the chief of staff, was a rigid centralizer who liked to keep control in his own hands, especially when he should have been the linchpin that connected the staff to the operations committee.³⁰

²³ Memorial for the Treasury of Personnel Passing through the Royal Navy, 1914-1918, TNA, ADM 1/8592/13 IB.

²⁴ Naval Officers to be Educated at Cambridge, 1919, TNA, ADM 1/8563/203; S.W. Roskill, "The Navy at Cambridge, 1919-1923," *Mariner's Mirror*, XLIX, No. 3 (1963), 178-193.

²⁵ Report of Bullying in Grand Fleet Battleships, 1916. TNA, ADM 156/21.

²⁶ Memorandum on Court Martial Procedure by the Judge-Advocate of the Fleet, 12 April 1919, TNA, ADM 1/8556/110.

²⁷ Sydney Moseley, *The Fleet from Within: Being the Impressions of a R.N.V.R. Officer* (London, 1919), 11-12.

²⁸ Case of Lieutenant Commander J. A. Rogers, RNR, 1916, TNA, Ministry of Transport Papers (MT) 23/688. Commander Rogers in a rather peremptory fashion ordered a regular RN officer about at Le Havre and the regular officer lodged an official protest.

²⁹ J.A. Fisher to Julian Corbett, 22 December 1905. See also CHAR 13/2, Fisher to Churchill, 6 November 1911, Fisher Papers, CCAC, FISR 1/4/191. "Of course the advantage of a Naval War Staff is that the country ain't ruined if you have a d—d fool as First Sea Lord. If you have a Barham as First Sea Lord he will dominate the War Staff. It never signifies anywhere whether you have a Board or a Committee - the ablest man runs the show!"

³⁰ Hunt, *Sailor Scholar*, 45. Admiral Sir Henry Oliver recounted the difficulties of keeping up with "two stupid old men and one raving lunatic."

Matters were made worse by a combination of secrecy and an apparent willingness to sacrifice operational commanders. In the series of disasters in the first months of the war, Admiralty orders were at least in part complicit. In particular, the treatment of Ernest Troubridge after the failure to catch the German battle cruiser *Goeben* in the Mediterranean contained a warning that operational commanders would be held responsible despite inadequate direction from London.³¹

The Admiralty's dispositions often left commanders afloat in parlous situations. After the loss of Cradock's squadron off Coronel in November 1914, Beatty bitterly opposed the needless withdrawal of battle cruisers to hunt down von Spee.³² Although two vessels were sent to the Falklands, two others were sent to the Caribbean in the event that the Germans attempted to use the Panama Canal to break into the Atlantic. This left Beatty's battle cruiser squadrons seriously weakened in the event of a sortie by the High Seas Fleet. As one officer on his staff wrote: "I look on it as verging on lunacy among those who have *not* had opportunity to study naval strategy, and little better than treason in those who have."³³

It was also brought home to many officers that the upper echelons of the officer corps were not fully up to their jobs. Many of the fiascos were ordered by officers thought to be the best representatives of the naval profession. Ernest Troubridge had received command of the Mediterranean cruiser squadron after he had served as the War Staffs first Chief of Staff from 1912 to 1914. Lewis Bayly had served as the Admiral President of the Royal Naval War College at Portsmouth before going to the Channel Fleet and presiding over the loss of *Formidable* on New Year's Day of 1915. Archibald Moore misread a signal from Beatty's flagship, *Lion*, which had been compelled to drop out of line due to heavy damage, and permitted Hipper's battle cruisers to escape.

Industrialized warfare invariably results in the death and maiming of large numbers of individuals. By the necessity of going to sea, officers risked their lives in peacetime as well as war. Hardly a *Britannia* term did not suffer the loss of several members through accident, sickness or action. Indeed, the old naval toast, "a bloody war and a sickly season," recognized that the deaths of others could and did often result in the advancement of the survivors. In the case of the Great War, the Royal Navy's manpower losses were relatively light compared to the massive losses sustained by the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) on the Western Front. In the entire four years of war, the navy suffered not many more losses than the Army encountered on the first day of the Battle of the Somme as total casualties were just over forty thousand.³⁴ Among those killed were three flag officers, nineteen captains, forty-one commanders and three hundred and ten lieutenants.³⁵

³¹ "The Question of Naval Courts Martial," *Blackwood's*, CXCVII (April 1915), 530-537.

³² Indeed, faulty dispositions left Rear-Admiral Christopher Cradock in such a state that he was completely inferior in strength to von Spee. H.W. Richmond who was serving as assistant director of operations at the Admiralty blamed Doveton Sturdee, the chief of staff. Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 131 ; as did David Beatty: Bryan Ranft (ed.), *The Beatty Papers* (London: Navy Records Society, 1989), 1:174.

³³ R. Plunkett to Richmond, 7 January 1915, N M M , RIC 7/4.

³⁴ Return on Manning during the War, September 1919, TNA, A D M 1/8592/13 IB.

³⁵ List of Obituaries of Naval Officers dying between 1903 and 1933, TNA, A D M 10/16.

What was disconcerting, however, were the meaningless casualties suffered as a result of a carelessness that appalled the general public and utterly frustrated officers humiliated by the perceived incompetence of others. The loss of highly skilled officers and ratings shook the confidence of the corps, especially when there seemed to be no countervailing benefit. By mid-November of 1914 the navy (including marines and reserves) had already lost over 4000 men (excluding officers) on active service.³⁶ Admiral Lord Charles Beresford was dismayed, as he wrote to Admiral W.H. Henderson, "I quite agree with you; the Navy will lose confidence in its leaders if Officers and men are murdered with no particular object whatever."³⁷

One of the available mechanisms that existed as a safety valve to direct criticism and self-examination in a positive way as well as a source of new professional ideas was *The Naval Review*. While *The Review* was originally intended to serve as an educational tool for junior officers when it was founded in 1913, it began after the outbreak of war to provide a venue to digest the war experience. In the words of Herbert Richmond, *The Review* could evaluate the war experience even at the cost of "undeserved reputations."³⁸ But it was not long before the journal ran afoul of the Admiralty for allegedly disclosing confidential information relating to the Falkland Islands operations.³⁹

In May 1915 Admiral Henderson had an interview with the Admiralty secretary, Sir William Graham Greene, during which the latter displayed a telegram from Jellicoe complaining that *The Review* had revealed sensitive information as well as civilians having access to the journal.⁴⁰ Henderson mounted a spirited defence, informing the secretary "the objections made by Sir J. Jellicoe were frivolous. I could only infer that there was some other cause for his doing it." When this was debated within the Admiralty, Oswyn Murray concluded that "[i]f the Chief Censor [Rear Admiral Douglas Brownrigg] is right in describing the articles as a 'mass of valuable secret information,' it is quite clear that NO precautions ought to be regarded as adequate: the magazine ought to be suppressed at once."⁴¹ Murray, however, could not fathom what information could be of possible use to the enemy.⁴²

Henderson carried the issue even further in July but still could not understand Jellicoe's objections. "There might well be 2 or 3 paragraphs that some particular officer would disapprove of, just as there are liable to be paragraphs daily in the Press that certain individuals would dislike, but as long as they are facts and are part of the history of the operations of the war, and fair comment for a useful purpose there can be no possible utility in trying to suppress them. I am sure you will agree with me that silence, suppression of

³⁶ Report on Number of Royal Naval and Royal Marine Personnel killed up to 17 November 1914, TNA, A D M 1/8403/429. A further 3,500 would be added at Coronel alone later that same month.

³⁷ Beresford to Henderson, 18 January 1915, Henderson Papers, N M M, H E N 2/2.

³⁸ H. W. Richmond to W. H. Henderson, 11 February 1919, N M M, R I C 7/1.

³⁹ Graham Greene to Henderson, 14 May 1915, Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth (RNM), Naval Review Papers (NRP).

⁴⁰ Notes on an Interview with Sir W. Graham Greene, 27 May 1915, R N M, N R P.

⁴¹ Censorship of *The Naval Review*, 1915, minute by Oswyn Murray, 22 June 1915, TNA, A D M 1/8423/157.

⁴² *Ibid.*

facts, or legitimate descriptions are harmful to the Service and merely defeat the ends of those who try to enforce it."⁴³

Jellicoe also complained to the Admiralty about the publication of confidential material in *The Naval Review* about Coronel. As Richmond testily noted in his diary: "A telegram came in this morning from Jellicoe saying that the May number of *The Naval Review* contained a lot information which would be useful to the enemy. He referred particularly to accounts of the movements of ships in the beginning of the war and to papers giving hints of experience in the Falkland Islands Battle. This is extraordinarily childish."⁴⁴ The French apparently published the opening movements of their armies at the beginning of the war. Richmond argued, "but our Admirals, jealous as usual of our officers knowing anything, believe that the proceedings of a few cruisers 6 months ago are of such importance that they cannot be divulged. It is puerile." Jellicoe advocated having *The Review* either censored or closed down entirely for the duration of the war.⁴⁵ Dewar wrote to Henderson: "I think it most unnecessary and unjust. There is not a word in the pages mentioned which could be of the slightest assistance to the enemy. Once censorship begins you do not know where it will end. The Admiralty will probably endeavour to carry it on in peacetime and the utility of *The Naval Review* will disappear. Thousands of men have been killed and the war prolonged owing to our faulty system of Admiralty administration & the lack of any war training for officers. Only publicity and criticism will alter that after the war."⁴⁶ Henderson in turn wrote to the Admiralty, attacking Jellicoe's argument that *The Review* could not be trusted to maintain secrecy because the society had civilians among its members. He provided a list of the non-naval members, including A. J. Balfour, Austen Chamberlain, Julian Corbett, Graham Greene, Sir Edward Grey, Lord Haldane, Lord Selborne and Lord Sydenham, all of whom had access to all sorts of Government secrets.⁴⁷ Nonetheless in October, *The Review* was formerly suspended.⁴⁸ Henderson continued to collect material for the *Review* because the intention was to resume publication after the conclusion of the war. His London house became a clearing-house and a sort of a precursor to the modern think-tank as he acted as a crucial link between younger officers, the press and the politicians.⁴⁹

The most traumatic event, however, was the Battle of Jutland. Although twice outmanoeuvred by Jellicoe, Scheer was able to escape. To make matters worse, severe losses were inflicted on the battle cruisers. This was intensely frustrating, as Lieutenant Stephen King-Hall related: "I felt I wanted to burst into tears, hit somebody, or do something equally foolish."⁵⁰ The sense of frustration at failing to bring the High Seas Fleet to decisive action seemed to call into question the strategic and tactical doctrine of the Grand Fleet.⁵¹

⁴³ Henderson to Graham Greene, 22 July 1915, RNM, NRP.

⁴⁴ Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 157; diary entry, 12 May 1915.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ K. G. B. Dewar to Henderson, 8 June 1915, RNM, NRP.

⁴⁷ Henderson to Admiralty, 4 June 1915, TNA, ADM 1/8423/157.

⁴⁸ Graham Greene to Henderson, 13 August 1915, RNM, NRP.

⁴⁹ Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar*, 56-57.

⁵⁰ Stephen King-Hall, *North Sea Diary, 1914-1918* (London, 1919), 160.

⁵¹ Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London, 1996), 503-536.

This situation was further magnified by the Admiralty's maladroit handling of Jellicoe's despatch, which the press took to indicate that the Grand Fleet had suffered a defeat. If the best commanders in the navy could not perform up to expectations, something was seriously wrong with the system. Moreover, a visible split opened between the officers and men of the battle cruiser and battle fleets. Lord Mountbatten, then a midshipman in HMS *Lion*, remembered many years later the prevalent feeling of superiority of the battle cruiser personnel. "This came, I gathered, from having a small, brainy but over-cautious man like Jellicoe as the Commander-in-Chief; obviously he was not a real fighting leader like our beloved Beatty."⁵² Hence, there was a developing weakness in the faith in Jellicoe's leadership. Moreover, his tendency to centralize tactical control in his own hands became crucial after December 1916 when he became first sea lord following Henry Jackson.

All the disagreements, unnecessary losses and professional in fighting between the autumn of 1914 and the end of 1916 could be contained. In many ways these disputes were no more serious than those in the old wars.⁵³ Even Jutland, as bitterly disappointing as it was, did not fracture the service until after the Board of Admiralty and the professional officers lost confidence in the wake of unrestricted submarine warfare and the Admiralty's apparent inability to address heavy losses.

At the same time that the Allied cause was wavering, with Russia wracked by internal revolt and the French army being bled white, the sure shield of the British empire, the navy, had confessed its professional failure. Despite the fight with other professions and the insecurity of the officer corps, their core competence of exercising command at sea had remained.⁵⁴ Yet with the advent of an entirely new type of naval war the corps was unable to cope with the changed circumstances. Despite the best efforts of Jellicoe and some of the officers he brought with him when he became first sea lord, no appreciable dent had been made in losses. Only one mechanism was resisted as defensive: the convoy. While the staff division under Rear-Admiral Alexander Duff was working to further technological advances to defeat the U-Boat menace, there seemed to be no connection to the core of the problem. It was only quite by accident that one of Duff's assistants, Commander Reginald Henderson, uncovered the problem's true nature.⁵⁵

That the primary difficulty the Admiralty faced *operationally* in the year 1917 was the unrestricted submarine campaign against shipping is uncontested. The submarine provided a threat that had not been anticipated, and the Admiralty found itself at a loss to deal with its implications. The arming of merchantmen and the independent routing of vessels seemed reasonable propositions if submarines operated by prize rules that compelled them to surface and give warning prior to sinking a vessel. However, the rules had changed

⁵² Louis Mountbatten, "The Battle of Jutland," *Mariner's Mirror*, L X V I, No. 2 (1980), 101.

⁵³ For example, the case of the dispute between Admirals Lestock and Matthews in the aftermath of the Battle of Malaga in 1744. See John Creswell, *British Admirals in the Eighteenth Century: Tactics in Battle* (London, 1972), 62-80.

⁵⁴ See, Robert L. Davison, "In Defence of Corporate Competence: The Royal Navy Executive Officer Corps, 1880-1919" (Ph.D. diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005), 128-218.

⁵⁵ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, IV: 150-151; Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, (London, 1994), 355.

at the end of 1916 when the German high command calculated that by pursuing an unrestricted campaign it could knock Britain out of the war before the United States could intervene. In the process, one of the Admiralty's key assumptions was rendered irrelevant. In the first three months of the campaign U-Boats sank nearly four million tons of shipping, while yards produced a mere half million tons.⁵⁶ The situation was so grave that the government was forced to buy up shipping, institute rationing, adjust labour policy and re-examine overseas commitments. If losses had continued it was doubtful that Britain could have remained in the war.

More frightening than the loss of valuable shipping was the Admiralty reaction to it. Even before Jellicoe was appointed first sea lord, a November 1916 report argued that the only solution was "palliation."⁵⁷ Despite Jellicoe's efforts to re-organize the naval staff, very little of a positive nature occurred. Indeed, in April 1917 Britain lost almost 900,000 tons of shipping in a single month. Jellicoe's reaction was brutally frank: "The real fact of the matter is this. We are carrying on this war... as if we had the absolute command of the sea. We have not - and have not had for many months... It is quite true, of course, that we are absolute masters of the situation as far as surface ships are concerned, but it must be realised ... that all this is quite useless if the enemy's submarines paralyse, as they do now, our lines of communications."⁵⁸ Jellicoe went on to press for limitations on overseas commitments to ensure sufficient tonnage to continue the campaign in Flanders and to supply both France and Italy. Jellicoe's arguments could not have come at a worse time, since Lloyd-George was engaged in a running battle with the General Staff and Douglas Haig over the direction of the war.⁵⁹

When Jellicoe's pessimism turned to despondency he began to appear to be an obstructionist. The First Sea Lord became increasingly impatient with the politicians' constant urging for offensive measures. He had even less patience with the efforts of junior officers, as he wrote in response to what he called the "six-monthly" agitation.⁶⁰ Interference by politicians, especially Lloyd George and Eric Geddes, was also anathema to Jellicoe. The problem was that Jellicoe lacked the stature and personality to assert his views in the highest councils. Moreover, his legitimacy was challenged from both within and without the service.

Vice-Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, the deputy first sea lord whom Geddes had appointed to relieve Jellicoe of some of his vast responsibilities, also found his position impossible. In fact, he was given little work at all. Wemyss cornered the first sea lord on this issue in early December 1917 and demanded to know whether Jellicoe trusted him. Jellicoe responded that he had complete confidence in him "... but he could see no way towards shifting any of his responsibilities on to me, since such would not be legal. My reply was that it was, legally a matter for the First Lord, and that if he chose to appoint certain duties to me,

⁵⁶ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, IV:65 and 103.

⁵⁷ Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 11:144-149.

⁵⁸ TNA, A D M 1/8480; see also Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 11:161, April 1917.

⁵⁹ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, IV:202-206; John Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (London, 1990), 319-325.

⁶⁰ Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 11:168, Jellicoe to Sir Edward Carson, 7 June 1917.

the procedure would be constitutionally correct. Sir John did not agree."⁶¹ Jellicoe exemplified the awful majesty of the post he held and failed to realize that in modern total war, complete responsibility could not devolve onto a single man. The truth was that Jellicoe nearly broke himself attempting to uphold the "war lord" position that Fisher had previously arrogated onto himself.⁶² It did not matter whether Jellicoe's critics at the Admiralty had a point; the point was that he had become the problem.⁶³

The heavy losses and the self-confessed inability of the Admiralty to cope with this new type of warfare deprived the professional leadership in the service of their legitimacy in the eyes of the war cabinet, the general public and, most the officer corps itself. Some began to wonder openly whether the army could win the war before the navy lost it. As losses mounted and the navy's response continued to be inadequate the service lost stature. At the end of April 1917, Lloyd George personally visited the Admiralty to discover what methods the Naval Staff intended to implement to address the situation. The Prime Minister was convinced that Jellicoe was spending too much time on routine work. "I consider it of the utmost importance that the First Sea Lord should be relieved of as much detail as possible... One obstacle to this, which Sir John Jellicoe mentioned, was that unless he exercises his personal initiative and drive he could not obtain the material he required sufficiently quickly. This is obviously wrong, and it is of the utmost importance that the Admiralty should be so organised that the First Sea Lord is entirely free from the necessity of devoting his attention to the supply of *materiel*."⁶⁴ The level of interference, opposition and political pressure on the Admiralty led Sir Edward Carson, the First Lord, to write an extensive memorandum urging the establishment of a separate planning division. "I have observed that a good deal of criticism has lately been levelled against the Admiralty on the ground that no offensive operations with a specific objective are from time to time undertaken; and in conversation with the Prime Minister and other members of the War Cabinet, it is clear to my mind that this criticism has given rise to a good deal of dissatisfaction in many quarters with the present administration of the Admiralty."⁶⁵ Carson went on to contend that it was irrelevant whether this criticism was justified; the fact that it had currency meant that the Admiralty had to take steps to ensure that the navy was seen to be doing something. Carson argued for the creation of a special offensive measures section under the direction of the director of operations to be solely responsible for operational plans and to free Jellicoe of some administrative duties. This section was to be headed by two or three captains and a commander who would have access to all information. The plans conceived by this section were to be examined by the chief of the naval staff in the presence

⁶¹ Victoria Wemyss, *The Life and Letters of Lord Wester Wemyss* (London, 1935), 364. This is an excerpt from Wemyss's unfinished memoirs.

⁶² Nor did it help that Jellicoe was suffering from several medical ailments. See, Fisher to Winston Churchill, 30 January 1918, CCAC, CHAR 2/92.

⁶³ Donald Schurman, "Admiral Sir John Jellicoe," in Malcolm Murfett (ed.) *The First Sea Lords: From Fisher to Mountbatten* (WestportCT, 1995), 109.

⁶⁴ Note by the Prime Minister of his Conference at the Admiralty, 30 April 1917, TNA, Cabinet Papers (CAB) 63/20.

⁶⁵ Carson to Jellicoe, 7 June 1917; and Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 11:166-167, TNA, ADM 1/8489/118.

of the first lord.⁶⁶

Jellicoe was less than impressed with the agitation for offensive operations. "I have been informed that the Prime Minister sent for Captain Richmond (I assume in connection with this proposition), and it is probable that this was done at the instigation of Colonel Hankey. I do not make any comment on this interference with Admiralty administration by Colonel Hankey."⁶⁷ Jellicoe was particularly irked by the misperception that it was strictly the responsibility of senior members of the war staff to initiate offensive operations. Furthermore, with resources stretched to the limit, it was impossible to believe that the appointment of more officers was a panacea.⁶⁸

Considerable resentment was expressed toward Geddes when he came to the Admiralty, first as Controller and then as first lord. Part of this was because although he was not a professional officer, he was made a vice-admiral by a special order-in-council.⁶⁹ Even after Lloyd George left the Admiralty to its own devices, the admirals were not convinced of the need to follow through on the items discussed. "[E]ven then the Board were like the son in the Scriptures who was told to go and work in the Vineyard and replied, 'T go,' but went not."⁷⁰

Facing pressure from within the state machinery, Jellicoe also identified the press as an opponent. He believed that there were several ways in which newspapermen attacked his position. The first was political, as they twitted Carson, and by extension Jellicoe, over Ireland.⁷¹ The second was Arthur Pollen who criticized the Admiralty, in *Land and Water*, for not accepting his fire control system. Indeed, Jellicoe refused Pollen permission to distribute pamphlets in the fleet regarding gunnery practices, "my reason being that I knew that it would give rise in the minds of young and inexperienced gunnery Lieutenants to feelings of unrest with the present methods, which produced, with the assistance of Dreyer - whilst I was in the Grand Fleet most astonishing results." The third centre of dissent had to do with Admiral Sir Reginald Custance, who in Jellicoe's view should have "collapsed years ago - in view of the disproof of all his pet theories."⁷² Along with questioning the professional competence of the board came concentrated attacks from papers such as *The Daily Mail*, which were aided by a group of mid-grade officers under the loose leadership of Richmond who were determined that the structure of the Admiralty had to be overhauled.

What was new about this challenge was not only the close connection between these officers and the political press but also the officers' indifference to and even support of

⁶⁶ Memorandum by Carson, Planning Section of the Naval Staff, 7 June 1917, TNA, A D M 1/8489/118; see also Patterson *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 166-167.

⁶⁷ Jellicoe to Carson, 9 June 1917, TNA, A D M 1/8489/118.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Geddes was especially unpopular after the dismissal of Jellicoe in December 1917; BL, Jellicoe Papers, Add. MSS. 49036 vol. XLVIII, Cecil Burney to Jellicoe, 30 December 1917; where Burney describes Geddes as "that railway porter."

⁷⁰ N. Leslie to Lord Maclay, 14 February 1933, CCAC, ROSK 3/22.

⁷¹ Sir Edward Carson was a prominent Irish Unionist and defied the Government during the Home Rule crisis before the war.

⁷² Jellicoe to Wemyss, 12 May 1917, Wester Wemyss papers, CCAC, WMYS 4/4.

concentrated editorial attacks against their superiors on the Board of Admiralty. Indeed, Commander Reginald Plunkett, perhaps the most politically astute of these officers, concluded, "on the whole they appear to have drawn upon their heads that type of criticism which they have justly merited."⁷³ Press attacks were also welcomed by these "Young Turks" because they raised the possibility that they as a "despised and rejected minority" could save the nation, even to the point where some officers were prepared to fall on their swords.⁷⁴ Further, the press campaigns were regarded as necessary not only to preserve the strength and prestige of the navy but also to save the country from disaster. Indeed, Captain Drax argued that *The Daily Mail* had performed a national service in its "publish the tonnage" campaign in the summer of 1917. Still, a twinge of regret remained when he further observed "[i]t is a pathetic thing to descend to the lowest forms of journalism in our efforts to save the Country from disaster. There seems to be no alternative."⁷⁵

The criticism of Jellicoe was also intensely personal. Arthur Pollen to some degree blamed Jellicoe for the navy's failure to adopt his fire control system and was dismayed by the results at Jutland.⁷⁶ It was an open secret that the suppression of *The Naval Review* was done at the instigation of Jellicoe while he was at the Grand Fleet, a move that profoundly irritated Admiral Henderson and his friends. One such ally, Lord Northcliffe had made a nuisance of himself in the spring of 1917 when German aircraft dropped bombs near the press baron's home.⁷⁷ Although Admiralty censors had quashed stories in the *Daily Mail*, attacks on Jellicoe in October of 1917 reached the point where he sought the advice of the Attorney General, F.E. Smith, as to whether legal action could be taken against the newspaper.⁷⁸

Things were not made any easier within the officer corps, either. First, Fisher was still casting covetous eyes at the Admiralty and subjecting everyone to his biting observations.⁷⁹ On at least one occasion, Fisher had attempted to get Reginald Hall, the director of naval intelligence, sacked because of a perceived personal slight.⁸⁰ By early 1917, Fisher had grown more virulent in his correspondence and once even refused to discuss his master plan for dealing with submarine losses until he was placed at the head of the Admiralty.⁸¹ Despite Fisher's attempts at resurrection, he was not a serious threat. Moreover, Fisher had little legitimacy within the officer corps, especially after his conduct in May 1915

⁷³ Drax to Peter [illegible], 1 May 1917, CCAC, R. Drax Papers (DRAX) 1/16.

⁷⁴ Drax to Horace Plunkett, June 1917, CCAC, DRAX 1/16.

⁷⁵ Drax to Henderson, 29 August 1917, NMM, DEW 2.

⁷⁶ See Jon Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston, 1989).

⁷⁷ J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, Lord Northcliffe, & the Press, & the Great War, 1914-1919* (Kent, OH, 1999), 136.

⁷⁸ Geddes to F.E. Smith, 27 October 1917, TNA, ADM 116/1805.

⁷⁹ Memorandum by J.A. Fisher "The VI Big Balfourian Blunders or Admiralty Apathy for 18 Months," 1916, CCAC, M.P.A. Hankey Papers (HNKY) 4/10.

⁸⁰ William James, *The Eyes of the Navy: A Biographical Study of Admiral Sir Reginald Hall* (London, 1955), 82-89. Tensions between Hall and Fisher were aggravated by Hall's role in the ensuring that Fisher could not return to the Admiralty as first sea lord after his ultimatum to Asquith in May 1915.

⁸¹ Memorandum on Submarines by Fisher, 31 March 1917, TNA, CAB 21/7.

when he had effectively deserted his post.⁸²

Yet it was an entirely different matter with a group of comparatively junior officers who had considerable support within the leading elements of the service afloat, including Beatty. They offered concrete plans and ideas to get the Admiralty out of the professional quagmire in which it had become entrapped. More generally there was a group of officers who were aggrieved with Jellicoe because of the failure at Jutland, his decision to suspend *The Naval Review* and his systematic failure to come to grips with the submarine menace. But the personal element was comparatively minor. These officers did not attack Jellicoe because they disliked him but because they were convinced that doing so was the only way the naval staff could be made effective. To break the rules of discipline was a last resort that was conceived as a desperate move to save the situation.

These officers had been critical of the Admiralty administration and harboured dreams of seeing themselves in positions of authority. Indeed, they adopted an almost messianic role. As one of them wrote in 1917, "[w]e must turn at last to that despised and rejected minority who have studied war seriously before war began and *really* know how it ought to be run." Only they could offer systematic solutions to the navy's problems as Drax wrote to a friend: "I have long hoped, and I believed it to be right and proper, that we should continue to muddle through on amateurish lines, paying a colossal price, incurring colossal losses but winning through in the end by virtue of those many and very fine British qualities which even the stupidest... possess in full measure. I still hope it may be so."⁸³ One of these officers was Captain Reginald Drax (formerly Plunkett), who had been Beatty's flag commander and who after his promotion to post rank commanded the cruiser *Blanche* that was attached to the Grand Fleet. Drax had extensive political contacts through his uncle, Horace Plunkett, and Arthur Pollen. In a memorandum he asked his uncle to pass along to the First Lord (which was forwarded to Maurice Hankey in the CID Secretariat), he laid out the case for the officers' interference in the professional leadership of the board. Citing necessity as a rationale, "[t]hese younger officers had been utterly impotent, for the sole reason that their seniority was not sufficient to carry adequate weight."⁸⁴ Plunkett, however, did not take his nephew's claims at face value, and after bouncing the ideas off Hankey, challenged his arguments. Both Beatty and Jellicoe, he asserted, had been promoted without reference to seniority, and RN officers were superior in performance to either their Italian or French counterparts. He also noted that Jellicoe invited ideas from both Beatty and Tyrwhitt.

Drax responded to his Uncle's prodding: "Let me confine it to one man J——. He enjoys the applause and confidence of King & Country. What can I or what will history say against him?" This: defence of Scapa, evacuation of the North Sea, loss of *Audacious*,

⁸² When the conflict between Churchill and Fisher came to a head in May 1915, Fisher informed Asquith in a stiffly written letter that he would stay only as long as he was given a similar role as that accorded to Kitchener at the War Office. Without bothering to get a response, Fisher packed himself off to Scotland and was immediately ordered to return to London. See Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, 11:279-286.

⁸³ Drax to Peter ?, Enclosure "The Admiralty", 1 May 1917, CCAC, DRAX 1/16.

⁸⁴ Drax to Horace Plunkett, 20 June 1917, CCAC, DRAX 1/16.

holding the Battle Cruiser Fleet in port, failure to support the BCF at Hartlepool, Jutland... He is an ultra-materialist and is obsessive and overwhelmed with detail."⁸⁵ In other words, Drax wanted to place the strategic command on a professional footing and to reassert the authority of the executive branch by placing command on a scientific basis.

These officers were not foolish enough to stick their necks out to push for a revolution without establishing close contacts with the levers of power inside and outside the service. This group of intellectual officers had at least the tacit support of David Beatty, Reginald Tyrwhitt and Roger Keyes. Two of the most important members of the Young Turks, Richmond and Drax, were captains in the Grand Fleet, and the latter was Beatty's former flag commander. Despite Beatty's encouragement to Jellicoe in dealing with the politicians, there is strong evidence that he remained in close contact and sympathized with their efforts. Indeed, Richmond reported to Beatty the substance of his conversation with both the prime minister and the first lord when he returned to the Grand Fleet in June.⁸⁶ Beatty also frequently made use of advice tendered by Richmond while he was in the Grand Fleet and discussed at length the defects in Admiralty organization. Further correspondence survives between Drax and Beatty's secretary, Frank Spikernell. In addition, Beatty's wife was in contact with Arthur Pollen and fed information to him throughout 1917.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Lieutenant J.M. Kenworthy, a Richmond associate, had contacts with Northcliffe, and it was through the agency of the latter that he gained an interview with Lloyd George.⁸⁸ For these officers, however, press agitation was but a means to an end. Arguing that no great reforms were ever made without some form of public outcry, they tried to force those in power to respond to their critiques. Although there was a tendency to blame the politicians, they had only "stepped in to fill the mental vacuum which existed at the Admiralty."⁸⁹

A combination of backroom manoeuvring and the ruthless use of press contacts enabled these young officers and their allies to arrange interviews with the war cabinet and the prime minister as Carson was dismissed as being a captive of his immediate professional advisers.⁹⁰ The situation was especially grave in the spring of 1917, when Henderson started writing letters to members of the war cabinet, including the prime minister and Lord Milner. The ploy worked, and Henderson managed to obtain an appointment with Milner and by the first week in June had set up an interview between the prime minister and Richmond. The result of the latter was that Dewar was assigned by the prime minister to write weekly summaries for the war cabinet. This engendered deep resentment among the sea lords; when an opening occurred, orders were cut to send Dewar off to the East Indies as executive

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 261-262.

⁸⁷ Ranft, *Beatty Papers*, 1:422, Ethel Beatty to David Beatty, 7 May 1917. Beatty's wife was the intermediary between himself and Pollen.

⁸⁸ J.M. Kenworthy, *Sailors, Statesmen and Others* (London, 1933), 72-81.

⁸⁹ Dewar to Richmond, 7 May 1916, NMM, DEW 33.

⁹⁰ Dewar to Richmond, 1 July 1917, NMM, DEW 33. A judgement confirmed by Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, IV:54-56.

officer of a cruiser with no engines.⁹¹

Things got worse for Jellicoe and the Admiralty in general as Henderson continued to hammer at the navy's leadership in print as well as in private letters to the prime minister and other members of the cabinet. As the admiral wrote: "A new and better sort of brains are required if the war is to be brought to a successful conclusion or if we are to avoid disaster. The existing heads are incapable of organizing the Admiralty on lines that can effect this... and are discredited both in strategical, tactical and administrative sense; what is worse, brought up in a school which despises the politician and always tries to hoodwink him, as they have done in the case of the war cabinet and are therefore unworthy of confidence."⁹² Further, Henderson announced that the Admiralty was unlikely to act on its commitment to look for areas of offensive action. He concluded that there was only one officer who could devise such plans: Richmond.

Later in June, Henderson wrote to Milner that the major flaw in the system was the Admiralty's unwillingness to hold courts martial to clear the air. "The reply is a very simple one, it is because they abrogated under irrelevant excuses the time honoured custom of our forefathers to investigate all losses and failures by a Court Martial sitting in public, which would have elicited the TRUTH, apportioned blame when proved, caused the elimination of the unfit and their gradual supersession by those who were proving themselves capable."⁹³ Three days later, Henderson again wrote to Milner, enclosing a critical article he was proposing to send to *Land and Water*. Milner, careful to reply through the hands of his secretary, refused comment.⁹⁴

In late June, Drax wrote a draft memorandum, which he considered sending to the prime minister, outlining the discontent in the fleet with the Admiralty. Although the document was never sent, it provides insight into the thoughts of those revolutionaries who attempted to change policy in the summer and fall of 1917.

You probably know me well enough to believe that I have no axe to grind and no enmity to gratify. In making to you a detailed statement of the case as it now is I am actuated only by the urgent needs of the State, and for this reason I can keep silent no longer, though the chance of your doing good on this information may be sadly remote. For nearly 3 years now, a number of our younger naval officers who have studied war scientifically in days of peace, have been looking on with horror and amazement at the successive blunders of our Admiralty administration. Needless lives have been sacrificed, millions of pounds have been thrown away, and the fundamental principles of Strategy and Tactics have been violated again and again. These younger officers have been utterly impotent, for the sole reason that

⁹¹ Dewar to Richmond, 12 September 1917, N M M , DEW 33; "I have to very careful. I am looked upon as 'an exceedingly dangerous person!!' Be careful not to associate my name with anything."

⁹² Henderson to Lloyd George, 23 June 1917, N M M , HEN 2/5.

⁹³ Henderson to Milner, 29 June 1917, N M M , HEN 2/5.

⁹⁴ Henderson to Milner, 1 July 1917; and H. C. Thornton to Henderson, 2 July 1917, N M M , HEN 2/5.

their seniority was not sufficient to carry adequate weight. It may perhaps be urged in reply that they are only a clique of cranks whose ideas are no more use than anyone else's; but it can be proved that practically every one of our successive disasters and misfortunes have been foretold by one or more of these officers and in various cases have been put forward officially, either verbally or in writing, only to be contemptuously rejected...⁹⁵

Drax identified three key problems that led to the situation the navy faced. First, in the century after 1815 a faulty system of education, which he claimed crushed individual initiative and imagination, was permitted to become entrenched. He further claimed that there had been no proper study of the art of war among flag officers. "In fact the intellectual development of our Admirals at the present day is remarkably similar to that of our Generals at the time of the South African war, and for precisely the same reasons. There are of course brilliant exceptions like our CinC and Commodore Tyrwhitt, but these are isolated cases based on learning quickly from the teaching of war or on having evaded some part of that deadening peace routine which crushed out the brains of the majority."⁹⁶ While he wisely was chary of providing specific examples of dunderheads and Captain Blimps, he left it to his reader to fill in the gaps. Indeed, Drax blamed no particular individual for the system because "[f]hey are merely the victims of a vicious system and that deplorable defect in the English temperament, hereditary lack of imagination." The younger officers brought to the Admiralty during the war had become co-opted by the system. As an antidote, Drax urged the immediate replacement of many of the "naval rulers." But it was difficult to finding replacements who would possess the confidence of the fleet. Drax nominated Wemyss to replace Jellicoe and recommended the establishment of a small committee centred around Richmond and Dewar to oversee the reconstruction of the Admiralty.⁹⁷

The loss of confidence in the legitimacy of the Jellicoe regime resulted in a letter of dismissal from Geddes to the first sea lord on Christmas Eve 1917.⁹⁸ Wemyss replaced Jellicoe as first sea lord. A temporary crisis among the remaining sea lords was averted, and they were persuaded to stay on. Jellicoe went on half pay and was not employed again.

The experience of the Great War was profoundly traumatic for the RN's executive officer corps. Before 1914, forces associated with the ongoing revolution in naval affairs had exerted considerable pressure on naval officers. Despite these forces that altered, and even challenged, the status of executive officers, self-confident assertions about the corps' fitness to command remained untested. That changed with the outbreak of war in 1914. Professional officers were faced with a conflict dramatically different from what had been expected. The war presented innumerable tasks that did not involve exercising command from the bridge of a man-of-war. For these demands, officers were not well prepared. The result was intense frustration, and the claims made by officers were exposed to searching criticism not merely

⁹⁵ Unsent memorandum, 20 June 1917, CCAC, DRAX 1/16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Sir Eric Geddes to Jellicoe, 24 December 1917, TNA, A D M 116/1807; Patterson *Jellicoe Papers*, II: 246.

from outside the profession but also from within.

The incapacity of the Admiralty machinery and the senior executive officers to deal with the reality of industrialized warfare caused a crisis of confidence that was not confined to parliament or public opinion but also extended into the corps itself. To preserve the integrity of the officer corps and its professional status, this group of comparatively junior officers, with the backing of the fleet commanders, thought it imperative that they intervene to save the situation. Since mechanisms to correct errors and officers who were unfit for their posts did not exist, the Admiralty leadership was systematically by-passed. Suspicions before the war that the senior leadership was not up to scratch were confirmed after 1914.