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Culture and Circumstance

When people ask why governments took the decisions which led to war and why people supported them, they usually mean what reasons did they give or what motives did they hide? But our conscious and articulated motives are like the visible part of the iceberg; the assumptions and feelings, which make up our culture, lie behind the decisions we take, even if they are hidden from us. As one commentator put it, 'continuity is no accident. Social customs, like personal habit, economise human effort. They store knowledge, pre-arrange decisions, save us the trouble of weighing every choice afresh.'¹ They become particularly important in an intense crisis which may lead to intervention in a major war; Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, who more than any other carried the burden of the British decision to go to war in 1914, recalled afterwards:

It is not always easy for a man to trace the inward path and steps by which he reaches his conclusions; so much of the working of the mind is subconscious rather than conscious. It is difficult to be sure of one's own mind, one can only guess at the processes in others.²

Usually this means that a statesman feels highly constrained by circumstances but believes that foreign decision makers have more latitude in a crisis to change their policy and avoid the recourse to arms, while the successful resolution of the conflict requires the opposite perceptions.³ The leaders' ideas or preconceptions have been formed over generations and passed down through families, books and institutions such as schools, Churches or the media.⁴ Yet conventions also change; over the last 200 years institutions and ideas have altered with the vast social and economic transformation brought by the industrial revolution,

democratisation and education, and by the four great wars in which Britain has been involved, against France from 1793 to 1815, against Germany from 1914 to 1918 and from 1939 to 1945 and the Cold War with the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1990. The national culture has thus not only evolved but also proved strong enough to absorb generations of immigrants from France, the Netherlands, Eastern Europe and now from the Third World.

Each country's culture shapes its attitude towards warfare. Thus, even though educated Japanese read widely in Western literature in the early 20th century and Japan emulated Western economic and political methods, Japanese had a very different attitude towards the sacrifices which war demanded, the reasons for fighting and the way in which wars should be conducted in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵ Similarly, as China met few Great Power challengers for hundreds of years, traditional Chinese stressed psychological warfare over brute force and regarded warriors with some disdain, though they also put great weight on maintaining the Empire's prestige and supported the use of their army when this seemed unavoidable.⁶ In the Muslim world the Koran has shaped attitudes towards warfare and international affairs because it makes no distinction between religion and politics. Even so, there can be considerable differences of interpretation about the tactics which are permissible and the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world.⁷

It is sometimes easier to say which factors did not shape such attitudes, rather than the reverse, and, in the British case, the mass of literature on warfare dating from antiquity was clearly inaccessible to most of our ancestors. British society at the beginning of the 19th century and before was divided by the chasm separating those who had been educated from the illiterate or semi-literate.⁸ Nor was their direct experience a substitute for lack of literary knowledge; the illiterate majority can have had only a folk memory of the civil wars, which had ended half a century before. The army raised by the Stuart Pretender to the British throne marched in 1745 from Scotland to Derby but, while it lived off the countryside, its effects were geographically limited. The civil war in the mid-17th century and the Wars of the Roses in the 15th century affected the lives of far more people, although memories would have been attenuated as the generations passed.

Overseas campaigns in the Americas, India or against Napoleon no doubt had considerable impact in garrison towns and ports to which old soldiers and sailors returned with tales of strange lands and distant battles. But the number returning to the inland villages would have been smaller and their impact would have varied with their ability to describe

events which were so remote from the villagers' experience.⁹ Many of our ancestors must never have seen a warship and only occasionally met soldiers. Families might also move from one village to a neighbouring one and so widen peoples' knowledge and experience but the villages had only perhaps 200–400 inhabitants and the collective experience was still very limited.¹⁰

If they were unschooled and had no direct experience of warfare and only infrequent contact with those who had, where did our ancestors derive their view of war? Conflict is built into the structure of any society, between brothers and sisters, parents and children, and between the adults living in the village; children of all social classes gain their first lessons about the way people interact from what they observe around them and they would have seen plenty of trouble. A 19th-century historian summarised the disputes brought before the court during the 15th century in the little textile-producing and farming village of Castle Combe in Wiltshire; 'affrays, assaults, blood-shedding, tipping in ale-houses, eaves-dropping or night-walking, keeping bad houses, gaming or playing at forbidden games, barratry or disturbing the peace by false reports and quarrels'.¹¹ No doubt, most villages would have had 'rebels' determined to challenge the authorities, like John Rayner, discovered by the historian of the village of Foxton south of Cambridge, who was repeatedly fined over several decades for various offences from trespass to failure to keep his fences in order and encroaching on other people's land.¹² From such events and from interacting with other children, our ancestors would have learnt about quarrels and fights, and recent studies of childhood have found that 'children, particularly during middle childhood, refer to various aspects of peer relationships when they are asked to verbalise their understanding of peace and war'.¹³ Beyond this understanding of local conflict, the uneducated must have learnt about the more ferocious violence of warfare itself from their village church and the lessons they heard on a Sunday.

We will discuss Anglican teaching at length in the next chapter, but *The Old Testament* provided all Christians with a rare and powerful insight into the struggles for survival typical of primitive tribes. It described the periodic enslavement of the Jewish people by powerful empires and their attempts, in turn, to establish a secure homeland by expelling, enslaving or killing the members of rival tribes and their leaders.¹⁴ The *New Testament* told the story of the birth, the brief life and execution of Jesus of Nazareth after Israel had been conquered once again and become part of the mighty Roman Empire. The Roman centurions or officers were generally not represented as enemies, nevertheless,

the threats of war, riot and insurrection were ever present. The overt political message in the *New Testament* was quietist; Jesus advised the Jews to 'render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's', in other words to respect the demands made by political leaders and to separate religion and politics. At the same time, the personal message was activist; in one of his parables Jesus praised a Samaritan who looked after a Jew attacked by robbers. There has, thus, always been a tension in Christianity between trying to help other people and avoiding violence because, on the street or in international politics, going to the help of someone who has been attacked always risks involvement in conflict.¹⁵

The *Old Testament* account of the Jews' epic struggles for survival over the centuries would have familiarised everyone with the frequency of war and the threats to the weak. The way in which Christian 'soft power' gradually infiltrated the Roman Empire until Constantine 1 made it the official religion in 324 would have been less salient. As indeed would the way in which the Jews' religion gave them a unique sense of belonging and cohesion during the centuries when they were dispersed across the world after the Romans savagely repressed their rebellion in 70. The Cathaginians who were similarly dispersed disappeared from history, the Jews survived, despite centuries of persecution and pogroms, to retake Palestine from the people living there after the Second World War.

The educated classes would have listened to the same religious stories but their understanding of them would have been potentially deeper and their world-view wider than those of their illiterate neighbours because written culture is more likely to be cumulative. As John Stuart Mill pointed out, education is 'the culture which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successors, in order to qualify them for at least keeping up, and if possible raising, the level of improvement which has been attained'.¹⁶ On the other hand, this sort of culture is less grounded in immediate fact and thus more open to serious errors of judgement than the culture of the illiterate or semi-literate which, as pointed out above, was shaped, not by theory, but by cooperation and conflict in the family and the village. Elite culture has thus varied considerably over the ages; the bawdy stories told by the illiterate characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written towards the end of the 14th century, differ little from those told by modern comedians; on the other hand, the ideas put into the mouths of the more highly educated are sometimes barely comprehensible to modern readers. Elites experiment with new ideas, most of which turn out to be wrong but without which mankind would not progress. The majority suffer the consequences of the mistakes and benefit from the advances.

In traditional society mothers often provided wealthier children with basic education in literacy and religion before they began their schooling.¹⁷ Later, boys would have gone to the grammar schools, which spread in the 16th and 17th centuries, where they were taught Latin grammar and familiarised with the classical texts of Greece and Rome. Like the *Old Testament*, these would have shown them the pervasive nature of warfare and the struggle for survival in which the weak were swept aside by the strong. They would also have gained some knowledge of their own country's history, of the repeated invasions between Caesar's arrival in 55 BC and that of William 1 in 1066, of the various civil wars and of Britain's intervention in the Hundred Years War and other continental campaigns. Personal experience, religious instruction, classical education and national history shaped beliefs about the causes of wars, their impact and the qualities which armies, leaders and nations needed to survive and prosper.¹⁸

The leading 17th-century poet John Milton suggested in one of the most influential essays on education that 'a complete and generous education [is one] which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war'.¹⁹ What makes this comment distinctive is the equal emphasis it puts on preparation for peace *and* war, and the stress it places on justice and magnanimity. The first separates it from modern commentary on education, which would usually ignore wartime requirements because we think of peace as the norm and war as an unfortunate interlude rather than a normal part of life, while the second separates it from the purposes of education in those societies, such as Japan and Germany in the 1930s, where speaking about magnanimity and justice in the same context as warfare would have been regarded as an oxymoron.²⁰ In Milton's ideal school, where 130 students would be housed from childhood until their early 20s, they would practise fencing and wrestling 'which, being tempered with seasonable lectures and precepts to them of true fortitude and patience, will turn into a native and heroic valour, and make them hate the cowardice of wrong doing'. They would also study military science and learn how to march and to ride as cavalry. Here then was the greatest poet of the age and a man with experience of civil war and governmental service, trying to combine learning, moral principle and practical military application in a detailed educational syllabus.

Christian thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas had built on the classical principles of the just war, developed by Aristotle and Cicero, so that, while the Church recognised that warfare was inevitable in the circumstances, its doctrine tried to prevent the brutal struggles for survival of

the type described in the *Old Testament* breaking out between Christian nations by restricting both the number of occasions when war occurred and the methods then employed to achieve victory.²¹ The age when poets could laud King Harold Hardrada of Norway for the plunder and repression of his own and other peoples faded as Europe became more settled.²² In the 16th century, military writers still dismissed civilian suffering and boasted of their brutality but there were competing accounts and arguments which took a very different view.²³ Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, inventor and Jansenist, who was a contemporary of Milton, lashed the Jesuits for inventing bogus justifications for ignoring Christian ethics and weakening restraints on violence.²⁴ A century later, Lord Chesterfield advised his son that it was better to die in warfare than to do 'a base or criminal action' such as poisoning the enemy.²⁵ All this underpinned the movement to develop international law from the time of the 17th-century Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius to his 18th-century Swiss successor Emmerich de Vattel. Again, educated men were familiar with this evolution and it was not unusual for Vattel to be quoted both inside and outside Parliament.²⁶

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the rich had their minds broadened by the vogue for sending young gentlemen abroad to learn foreign languages and manners, and to appreciate art and architecture. At home or abroad, they could hardly have avoided knowing something about the ideas which have come to be called the Enlightenment. The movement's main contribution to international affairs was to popularise the notion that warfare could best be limited by collective efforts, and perhaps even federations, between nations.²⁷ This contrasted with the traditional religious belief that peace would grow from below when people's attitudes were changed. But monarchs, enlightened or not, continued to regard warfare as an extension of politics and the great powers were at war for over half of the 18th century, sometimes to expand their territory in Europe and overseas, sometimes out of fear that another state might acquire so much territory that the balance of power would be upset.²⁸ Preparing his son for a career in diplomacy, Lord Chesterfield sent him abroad to admire the customs and manners of foreign countries, and he also encouraged him to pay close attention to the strength of the countries he visited to assess their value as allies and the threat they might present to the balance of power.²⁹

Although the radical essayist William Hazlitt grumbled about London's café society in the early 19th century for its addiction to discussing ephemeral news, educated men had the time to give prolonged consideration to the writers of the Enlightenment and other serious

contemporary issues.³⁰ The August 1809 edition of the conservative *Quarterly Review*, for example, contained amongst other articles, 23 pages on the problems of the West Indian planters after the ending of the slave trade, 37 pages on the missionaries in the Pacific, 25 pages on mental illness, 14 pages on mineralogy, 14 pages on sermons and 30 pages on the war in the Iberian Peninsula. Such publications spread across the English-speaking world from the United States to Tasmania; they were not read just by a tiny British minority.³¹ As Milton hoped, some of the educated clearly had a wide range of interests – scientific, religious, military and humanistic. Speeches in Parliament were replete with learned illusions and shaped by the rules of classical rhetoric; however, there was a vast gap separating this articulate elite from the uneducated masses, not necessarily in terms of principles, but in their knowledge of the world. And, although this gap is much narrower today, members of the educated elite in Britain and other English-speaking countries are more likely to favour overseas intervention; they know, or think they know, more about events elsewhere and are more readily tempted to believe that other countries will benefit from their intervention.³²

The establishment of charitable religious schools in the 18th and 19th centuries very gradually widened the provision of education even before the 1870 Elementary Education Act made it free and universal, and attendance was compulsory from 1880. Numbers of schoolchildren then quadrupled from 1.2 million to 4.7 million.³³ Before that it was calculated that only two out of five children between six and ten years old ever attended school and only a third between the ages of ten and twelve.³⁴ Most of the rest expected to work from the moment they could provide useful labour on the farms, in the factories or in the great houses of the aristocracy. After the Education Acts the numbers with education and, therefore, the ability to read newspapers and gain some knowledge of political life widened dramatically and school teachers, pressure groups and the media began to influence their ideas in ways which would have been impossible before. As one political scientist rightly pointed out, ‘the educational revolution which made the state responsible for child-life was comparable in its sphere to the Industrial Revolution in economics and the French Revolution in politics’.³⁵

And so were the rapid changes in communications. One commentator noted in 1826:

We, who live in an age and country in which the means of locomotion and communication have been facilitated by all the power of human ingenuity and science, can scarcely imagine to ourselves

the difficulties of obtaining intelligence in those regions where newspapers are unknown and whose peaceful solitudes have never been disturbed by the bugle of the mail-coach guard. Destitute of these aids even bad news does not fly apace; and the details of passing events, which in the course of eight and forty hours are transmitted from the Channel to the border, could scarcely cover the same distance in a twelvemonth, when Fame was compelled to limp with her despatches along the primitive ruts, and patriarchal bridle-paths of Watling Street and Ikenild Street, and the other renowned highways.³⁶

The writer was about to witness the coming of the railway era which would make the age of canals and stagecoaches a relic of the past. Each age marvels at developments in communications and, in each, improvements in communications transform the speed with which news of events and ideas are transmitted and thus their impact on society. This, in turn, changes the balance of influence between institutions, so that, in the 19th century, the military had to pay more attention to newspapers whose war correspondents could rapidly transmit reports by telegraph over hundreds of miles to their editor's desk, and the popular writer could sometimes evoke fears of invasion amongst hundreds of thousands who would never before have troubled themselves about affairs of state.

The most important of these affairs over the last 200 years included the wars against France from 1793 to 1815, against Germany from 1914 to 1918 and from 1939 to 1945, and the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1990. In the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars 210,000 British servicemen were killed out of a population of some 12 million in 1811 or one in every 57 people, and, of course, a much higher proportion of young males.³⁷ Materially, the French Wars cost £1500 millions in loans and taxes.³⁸ The annual expenditure on the war rose from about £22 millions in the 1790s to £84 million in 1815 and, by the end of the war, the national debt had grown from £290 million in 1788 to £862 million, leaving Britain the most heavily taxed state in Europe.³⁹ The country was spared a test on the same scale for 100 years, though Britain lost 23,000 men in the Crimea between 1854 and 1856 and the campaign cost some £50 million.⁴⁰

During the First World War 730,000 servicemen were killed or one in 56 of its 41 million people over less than a quarter of the time occupied by the French Wars. During the French wars people seem to have accepted casualties more philosophically when the death of young people from disease or accident was so much more common. At the same time, the birth rate was very high and so, despite the deaths from disease

and war, the population grew by 2,146,000 or 28 per cent from 1791 to 1811.⁴¹ To put it in another way, death in childhood or early adulthood was less frequent before the First World War than it had been 100 years earlier. The size of the family was also declining and the loss of an only son was felt all the more keenly, as the death of Rudyard Kipling's son and tens of thousands of others demonstrated clearly. Certainly, if one examines the diaries kept by educated people, or their letters, there is no comparison between the impact of the French wars and the First World War; in the first case, they appear to have continued relatively unperturbed with their ordinary lives, in the second, their whole world was transformed and their minds constantly troubled by the news from France and the returning casualties.⁴² As a total conflict, the First World War taxed Britain's industrial and financial resources to the utmost, and again the Exchequer was left deeply burdened with debts because only 7 per cent of military expenditure had been covered by taxation in the early stages of the war, though this had risen to a quarter by the time the Armistice was signed. Most of the debt was to British citizens but the debt to the United States (had it not lapsed in the 1930s) would not have been repaid until 1984.⁴³

Britain may have suffered about half as many military casualties in the Second World War as in the First World War (360,000 civilian and military) out of a larger population of 46 million, but it faced a series of humiliating defeats in France, Singapore, Burma and Greece; its towns suffered much greater damage from bombers and missiles, and it could carry on fighting only because of US' financial, industrial and military support. This time the whole country was mobilised and half of the costs were raised through taxation. The government took care in this and other wars that the greatest burden fell on those most able to bear it. Income tax was raised for the first time during the wars against France, while in the 1920s the national debt was repaid by income and super tax payers, and by those estates rich enough to pay death duties. In the Second World War again the government tried to equalise the burden through food rationing and through heavy direct taxation.⁴⁴ The country was also saved by the US policy of 'lend-lease' of weaponry worth some \$21,000 million, but it still had to sell £1118 million in capital assets and borrow £2879 million from external creditors, leaving it weaker than ever before in modern history.⁴⁵

The Cold War gradually developed after the Second World War came to a close. Over the four decades that it lasted, the confrontation with the Soviet Union forced the country to spend a higher proportion of its GDP on defence than it had done during the heyday of its Empire; the cost per head in 1900 prices was £3.3, against £7.6 in 1952.⁴⁶ Britain

had 902,000 men in its armed forces in 1953, compared with 695,000 mobilised by France, none by West Germany and 119,000 by Japan. It was only in the later 1950s that the manpower balance altered as Britain led the way in phasing out conscription. But replacing conscripts with wholly professional armed forces was expensive; in 1972 Britain was spending 4.9 per cent of its GDP on defence against 3.4 per cent in France, 3.1 per cent in Germany and 2.9 per cent in Italy, and high defence expenditure was often blamed at the time for the comparatively slow rate of British economic growth.⁴⁷ The burden was important because it was one reason why governments were tempted to rely on deterrence to reduce costs, despite the protests of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

Prolonged tension and the threat of a greater disaster than any Britain had faced before in its history taxed the nerves more than other conflicts. The *Statement on Defence Estimates* for 1956 asserted bluntly that:

To give full protection to everyone from sickness or death from the hazard of radioactivity alone would involve physical preparations on a vast scale and to make such preparations against all the hazards of a thermonuclear attack on this country would place a crippling burden on the national resources.

The White Paper concluded, 'whatever the preparations made, an attack on this country would involve loss of life and destruction on an unparalleled scale'.⁴⁸ The assessment was truthful enough but it was hardly surprising that it fostered the CND, whose members felt that it was better to abandon NATO and retreat into isolation rather than live for decades under such a threat. Some of the ablest and best informed commentators, including the leading US columnist, Walter Lippmann, believed that long years of confrontation might be too much for the democracies: 'A policy of shifts and manoeuvres may be suited to the Soviet system of government, which... is animated by patient persistence. It is not suited to the American system of government.'⁴⁹ Given the way democracies vent such fears in public, it was not surprising that Lippmann thought as he did, even if events in the last decade of the 20th century were to prove him wrong.

As his fears about the Cold War remind us, victory in these wars was never certain; when Britain's continental allies were defeated, the country became largely impotent against Napoleon's Empire. Pitt could send British armies to the Caribbean and South Africa to take over

enemy colonies but even this was only achieved at the expense of immense sacrifice in lives and resources largely because of the yellow fever and other diseases to which they fell victim. It was not until Wellington found an effective way of deploying the British army in coordination with Spanish guerrillas, when Napoleon's armies were weakened by defeat in Russia and when British subsidies finally brought together an effective coalition of Russian, Austrian and Prussian forces, that the tide was turned.⁵⁰ The First World War was far shorter but by 1917 the various allied armies were bogged down, Russia was gradually collapsing into revolution and France had been weakened by attrition at Verdun and by the subsequent mutiny in its army. Losses of merchant ships to submarines increased dramatically and the Royal Navy had failed to destroy Germany's High Seas Fleet. It was only when Germany's final offensive ground to a halt in the Spring of 1918, when food shortages undermined Austria-Hungary and when the tide of fresh US reinforcements began to demoralise the Central Powers, that victory came into sight. The equivalent low point in the Second World War stretched from the Spring of 1940 to the Spring of 1942. The whole of Western Europe fell in the summer of 1940, the Royal Navy was defending merchant ships in the Atlantic against German submarines, RAF fighter aircraft were battling against the Luftwaffe over London, and the army was struggling to protect Egypt and the precious oil resources of the Middle East. The situation became even more difficult once the Japanese had entered the war in December 1941 and quickly overran Malaya, Singapore and Burma. Only as the Soviet defences steadied against the Nazis' onslaught and the immense resources of the United States began to come into play did it become obvious that the Axis were doomed and Britain was safe, albeit gravely weakened financially and emotionally.

The Cold War was made up of a series of confrontations and skirmishes around the world from Berlin to Cuba, and Korea to Mozambique. At the same time, British troops were embroiled in insurgencies from Malaya to Aden in which Soviet support for the guerrillas was suspected. Looking back it might seem clear that the West would be victorious over communism in such an economic, political and military test, but this was not so; during the 1960s and early 1970s it was the West which was most troubled. The United States was sapped by the guerrilla war in Vietnam, anti-war demonstrations, race riots in the cities and the demoralising assassinations of President John Kennedy, his brother, Robert and the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King.⁵¹ Britain seemed to be in terminal decline after the strains of the World Wars and the loss of Empire, with its GDP per head falling for the

first time in modern history below many of the other developed states including France, and the City of London facing one Sterling crisis after another.⁵² It was only as the 1970s wore on that it became clear that liberal capitalism was triumphing across East Asia, that Western Europe was stabilised and that the Soviet economy was in disarray, thereby ceasing to be a model for Third World States and for disaffected Western intellectuals.⁵³ It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Britain overcame its own demons and that the widespread assumption of the country's inevitable decline was dissipated. And the tradition of extra-European military interventionism revived.

In great military conflicts governments have become steadily more confident about popular support. Because the whole nation was insufficiently educated to join the political community and the ruling elite knew less about the opinions of the masses, Pitt's government feared the disaffection of the poor more than any of his successors were to do.⁵⁴ Thus governmental repression of dissent was greater during the French Wars than it was ever to be again. Conscientious objectors were persecuted during the First World War, refugees from Germany were, for a time, rusticated to the Isle of Man during the Second World War, fascist sympathisers were interned and traitors, like L. S. Amery's son, John or the propagandist William Joyce were hanged at the end of the conflict. In both the World Wars there was more anxiety about German spies operating in Britain than was justified by the threat they represented and national fears led to a number of miscarriages of justice, but repression was much less than it had been in the 1790s and there was no serious challenge to political stability.

The Cold War brought different problems because, as in the 1790s, those who wanted radical reforms could be easily confused in the tensions and anxieties of the moment with the handful who actually spied for the enemy. The fears were all the greater because of the seniority of the spies, who worked for the Soviet Union in the 1940s; Kim Philby was the liaison officer between MI6 and the CIA, Donald Maclean ran the American Department of the Foreign Office, Anthony Blunt was Keeper of the Queens' pictures and Klaus Fuchs worked in the Manhattan project to produce nuclear weapons, the most secret of all the Second World War programmes. Collectively, they were the most dangerous spies working for an enemy of the British state for 400 years. The government responded by tightening security procedures for entrants to official employment and the threat declined in parallel with the Soviet Union's attraction to disaffected Western intellectuals but it never disappeared until the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

The communist spies were, however, an aberration. Governments have become more confident in the 20th century about the nation's cohesiveness in wartime even though sensitivities over casualties and costs have increased as people have become more aware of them. Indeed the real problem is that debate is stifled to such a large extent in great wars that it becomes impossible to have a public discussion about the options.⁵⁵ In November 1916 the former Viceroy of India and Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne circulated a memorandum to the cabinet on Britain's prospects which, after examining Britain's resources and the losses so far, concluded:

It is... our duty to consider, after a careful review of the facts, what our plight and the plight of the civilised world will be after another year, or, as we are sometimes told, two or three more years of a struggle as exhausting as that in which we are engaged.... Our own casualties already amount to over 1,100,000.... We are slowly but surely killing all the best of the male populations of these islands.... Generations will have to come and go before this country recovers from the loss which it has sustained in human beings, and from the financial ruin and the destruction of the means of production which are taking place.⁵⁶

The cabinet then tried to balance the losses against the objectives but, when Lansdowne broke his public silence by writing a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 1917 calling for a compromise peace, he was bitterly attacked on the grounds that he had improved enemy morale by giving the impression that Britain was on the verge of defeat.

In peacetime, by contrast, the national debate on warfare has become livelier, as more institutions and individuals have become involved, and the public has had a greater say, but, because of opinion polling, governments expect the public to become less excited than they did in the first half of the 20th century. A well-informed German observer commented on the British political scene in the 1930s, 'once the British get warmed up politically, they take a long time to cool down. All who know this, from the Prime Minister downwards, tread warily when the political temper of the people is roused.'⁵⁷ As we shall see in Chapter 9, subsequent opinion polling showed that the public as a whole were more phlegmatic than such comments suggested. It is to the individuals and institutions, which have both reflected and tried to change public attitudes that we turn in the next chapters.