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Strategy and Propaganda:

Lord Kitchener, the Retreat from Mons, and the Amiens Dispatch, August-September 1914

Stephen Badsey

Among the dramatic events that marked the start of the First World War, British political and military decisions and actions are particularly well documented and researched. These well-known events include the complex political balancing act conducted by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in the crisis of July-August 1914, in his successful attempt to minimise resignations from his Cabinet and revolts within his Liberal Party, and to lead both Parliament and the country united into the war. They also include the creation before the war and the deployment in August 1914 of the British Army's Expeditionary Force (re-designated the British Expeditionary Force or BEF before the end of the month, which is how it is usually known), and the confirmation of Field Marshal Sir John French as its Commander-in-Chief. Equally well-known is the appointment of Field Marshal Earl Kitchener to the post of Secretary of State for War on 5 August, his call for volunteers to create a new mass British Army, and the unexpectedly large popular response. Yet another well-known story is the BEF's first battles at Mons and le Cateau, the successful retreat from Mons, and the decision to turn the BEF to participate in the decisive Battle of the Marne in September. Most accounts that follow the British military story that far (and many do not, preferring to stop with the first declarations for war), also acknowledge the importance of the Amiens Dispatch (sometimes called the Mons Dispatch), a sensational account of the battles of Mons and le Cateau published in a special Sunday edition of *The Times* newspaper on 30 August, which also features in most accounts of British propaganda in the war, and of the British Home Front. It is often stated as fact both that Kitchener's personal call to arms was the principal motivator of British military volunteerism in 1914 (often if incorrectly called 'the rush to the colours'), and that it was Kitchener's personal animosity towards war reporters that largely determined British policy towards the national press's reporting of the BEF's actions in this period. It is the purpose of this present account to assemble a narrative chronology of these events, so revealing the critical interaction between politics and strategy, military operations and battles, social and cultural responses at home including volunteerism, and both the nature and apparatus of British propaganda.

The first formal War Office recommendations regarding the press accompanying a British army in wartime date from 1878, while the first regulations for accreditation of newspapermen to accompany a British army in wartime were established in 1889.¹ Like all subsequent British government regulations, these were based on negotiated agreements with the influential London press rather than on dictated control or censorship. The first large-scale British experience of the problems with such agreements came in the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902. In what would be a reoccurring theme of British propaganda up to the present day, an agreement reached between the government and the media in peacetime only through compromises, with both sides making their own interpretations of what had been agreed, broke down rapidly under the immediate pressures of war. Kitchener as Commander-in-Chief in South Africa for the later part of the Anglo-Boer War was particularly hostile to what he saw as adverse press reporting. In July 1901 he had mused to the sympathetic Howell A. 'Taffy' Gwynn, then of Reuters news agency, about one day appointing a solitary official 'chronicler of the war', perhaps Gwynn himself, as the only correspondent allowed with the army.²

Kitchener played no part in the subsequent development of British government ideas on how to control the press in war-time, which were first prompted by the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5. The chief concerns came from the Royal Navy rather than the British Army, and arose in consequence of newspapers reporting the deployment of British warships following the Dogger Bank incident. From 1905 onwards the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) attempted intermittently to draft legislation 'for the control of the publication of naval and military information in cases of emergency' (meaning war), and canvassed the views of numerous national and provincial newspaper editors.³ In March 1910, the CID formed a 'standing sub-committee regarding press and postal censorship in time of war', initially chaired by Winston Churchill as Home Secretary, which liaised with government departments including the Admiralty and War Office on planned wartime procedures, and which also considered the possibility of setting up an official Press Bureau in peacetime.⁴ The result of these deliberations was that, as on previous occasions before the Anglo-Boer War, the government found that it was both impractical and politically unachievable to establish in peacetime any legislation and institutions to regulate the press in a future war. Instead, in August 1912 the Admiralty and War Office formed the 'Standing Committee of Official and Press Representatives to deal with the publication of Naval and Military News in times of emergency', a decision once more largely prompted by Admiralty concerns over newspapers reporting movements of the fleet, in this case during the 1911 Moroccan Crisis, coupled with government uncertainty and reluctance to use the powers of the new 1911 Official Secrets Act directly against the press.⁵ Shortening its name first to the 'Joint Standing Committee of Admiralty, War Office and Press Representatives', and later to the 'Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee', the resulting committee met regularly from October 1912 onwards, with a core membership consisting of Sir Graham Greene the permanent secretary for the Admiralty, Reginald Brade an assistant secretary from the War Office (later Sir Reginald and permanent secretary from 1914 onwards), Edmund Robbins of the Press Association as the committee secretary, and representatives of the Newspaper Society, the Newspaper Proprietors Association, the Irish Newspaper Society, the Federation of Northern Newspaper Owners, and the Federation of Southern Newspaper Owners; military and naval officers sometimes attended, including Brigadier-General Henry Wilson as Director of Military Operations. The chief function of this committee was to provide government advice and guidance to newspapers regarding what might constitute a security risk.

The Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee was chiefly concerned with higher policy, and with how newspapers rather than reporters might act. The role of individual reporters if the BEF was mobilised for war was within the remit of the War Office. In this case also, before 1914 largely informal or negotiated peacetime understandings prevailed, together with some practices established in the Anglo-Boer War, and the continuing 1889 agreement on accreditation of newspaper correspondents. Prior to the war, Henry Wilson's Directorate of Military Operations already contained a small staff group designated MO5(h) which was responsible for overseeing military press and postal functions. Charles Callwell, who had been Assistant Director of Military Operations 1904-7, had retired as a colonel in 1909, and was himself a notable military writer, described in his post-war memoirs the existence in 1914 of a small War Office staff grouping (presumably meaning MO5(h) or part of it) established in 1911 or 1912, with its own transport and clerks, to function as the press escort and liaison for the BEF in the event of mobilisation, and headed by Major A.G. Stuart, who 'had been in control of the Press representatives' in the 1912 Army manoeuvres and the smaller 1913 Army manoeuvres, both of which were accompanied by a sizeable number of reporters.⁶

It is quite certain that the events that would lead to the publication of the Amiens Dispatch were not planned or initiated by any official British propaganda organisations, for

the simple reason that no such organisations existed at the time. The first government institution dedicated to wartime propaganda, which was based at Wellington House in London, was only established in the week beginning Sunday 30 August 1914, the day that the Amiens Dispatch was published.⁷ But in a manner entirely characteristic of British propaganda organisation, although Wellington House came eventually to be designated as the War Propaganda Bureau, it continued to be known in official circles by its earlier name, and to do much of its work through informal or semi-official contacts. Indeed, the key to much of British propaganda was the very close informal contacts that existed between members of the government, the civil service and armed forces, and the owners or editors of important newspapers, along with other leading figures in society. This included pre-war 'gentlemen's agreements' that were to be severely tested by the pressures of the July-August 1914 war crisis. On Monday 27 July, the day after the Serbian reply to Austria-Hungary's ultimatum, the Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee held a quick meeting at the Admiralty, at which one member, Sir George Riddell as chairman of the Newspaper Proprietors Association, complained that 'it was very easy to make agreements in time of peace, but when the emergency arrives and the public is avid for news, the situation was difficult'.⁸ The result of this meeting was a secret communiqué issued by the committee next day, drafted according to Riddell by himself and Edmund Robbins as committee secretary, addressed to all British newspaper editors and asking them not to report the movements of British warships, troops or aircraft. At a further meeting on Thursday 30 July the committee noted that *The Times* had referred to one small naval movement, and that the newspapers were pressuring the Admiralty and War Office with enquiries. But other than these kinds of minor slips and leaks, the communiqué's request was very largely honoured, and in the following weeks British newspapers maintained silence about the BEF as it mobilised and deployed to France. Only on Tuesday 18 August, the day after the BEF's deployment was completed, did the British press announce that it had crossed to France.

The Thursday 30 July meeting of the Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee also discussed the matter of war correspondents being sent with the BEF if it should deploy overseas. Robbins as secretary suggested that the War Office should form a small committee with the press to discuss this; Riddell added that they should call for newspapers to provide a register of correspondents to be given accreditation; and Reginald Brade for the War Office pointed out that no decision had yet been taken on sending the BEF (in fact a cabinet decision on the previous day had been not to send it, as no war had yet been declared); after this discussion it was resolved 'to leave the matter over for the present'.⁹ The committee did not meet again until 20 August, by which date both circumstances and its role had changed considerably with Britain's entry into the war and the despatch of the BEF. This meeting on 30 July showed clearly that both the War Office and the newspaper representatives expected accredited reporters to accompany the BEF if it were sent overseas, and that this would be a reasonably straightforward procedure, but that no practical decisions or detailed planning had taken place, contrary to the impression given in Callwell's memoirs.

The formal British declaration of war against Germany came into force at 11.00 p.m. on Tuesday 4 August, and the mobilisation of the BEF began next day. A severe problem for other major powers in the war crisis, notably for Germany and Austria-Hungary, may have been an excess of influence and authority by senior army officers. But for Great Britain the opposite was true, and the problems lay in military weakness and in a near power-vacuum in the military high command. Since the Curragh Mutiny (or Curragh Incident) of April 1914, the post of Secretary of State for War, the political head of the Army, had been vacant with Asquith notionally carrying out the role himself. Field Marshal Sir John French had also resigned as Chief of the Imperial General Staff over the Curragh, the professional head of the Army, being replaced by the lesser and politically inexperienced figure of General Sir Charles

Douglas. French remained through summer 1914 in a kind of military limbo; he had for some years been the designated Commander-in-Chief of the BEF if it was mobilised, but it was far from clear in the July-August crisis that he would automatically be given the post. Kitchener had arrived in Britain from Egypt on Tuesday 23 June to receive his earldom from King George V, and it was largely by accident that he was available to be offered the War Office as a political appointment. Asquith's decision to offer Kitchener the War Office, and his confirmation of French as commander of the BEF, were entirely politically based and took place in the context of considerable political and press lobbying. The most cynical view of Asquith's offer to Kitchener was that Asquith wanted a scapegoat at the War Office in case of British defeat. As a less conspiratorial explanation, Asquith needed both men as famous military figures, to reassure his cabinet colleagues, so minimising resignations, and also to reassure the mass of the public.¹⁰

What is also clear, both from the two Councils of War held by Asquith on Wednesday 5 and Thursday 6 August, and from the comments of several cabinet members at the time, is that in comparison to their knowledge of finance or domestic politics most of them had only the most general or vague understanding of the nature of the war on which they were embarking, or the strengths and weaknesses of the BEF. Recent historical research has identified many of these weaknesses, largely stemming from the small size of the BEF, at six infantry divisions and five cavalry brigades, and the Army's efforts before the war to retain even this number by expedients and by duplicating positions and functions.¹¹ The only formation within the BEF that was genuinely fully trained and ready for war was Aldershot Command under General Sir Douglas Haig, which formed I Corps on mobilisation, consisting of a higher headquarters who had trained together, two infantry divisions, and a cavalry brigade. Otherwise, much about the BEF was a matter of hurried improvisation. The BEF's other four infantry divisions, making up II Corps and III Corps, were to varying degrees underequipped and more heavily dependent on reservists than Haig's I Corps. French's own headquarters staff was hurriedly improvised and changed as the BEF deployed, much to his frustration and annoyance. There were also no pre-war permanent headquarters for II Corps, III Corps or the Cavalry Division (comprising four of the cavalry brigades). Along with other training institutions, the Army Staff College at Camberley was closed down not (as some historians have suggested) from the conviction that this would be a short war with no need for further trained staff officers, but because its staff and instructors had crucial designated wartime roles.¹² The Commandant at Camberley, Brigadier-General Lancelot Kiggell, moved on 5 August to become Director of Military Training at the War Office; Charles Callwell, also, was recalled from his retirement of five years to become Director of Military Operations at the War Office. The pre-war decision to free experienced staff officers familiar with the latest developments in the Army to take positions within the BEF on mobilisation, and to replace them at the War Office with others, caused considerable disruption within the War Office itself, even more so as this was combined with Kitchener's unexpected appointment, and with Douglas as an inexperienced Chief of the Imperial General Staff who was not himself a qualified (psc) general staff officer.

Both prior to Asquith's two Councils of War and during them, French and Haig both floated the idea that the BEF's departure should be delayed or its concentration area changed, which would have given more time for its training deficiencies to be made good and perhaps increased its strength. Despite this, once the decision was made that the BEF was to be sent at once, the only plan for which the transport and supply had been pre-organised in detail was that which was in fact implemented: a deployment to Maubeuge and advance into Belgium in support of the French Fifth Army. But there was also a genuine fear within the two Councils of War both of a surprise German raid across the English Channel, for which plans already existed to hold a division in reserve, and of possible riots if the British financial system

collapsed as a result of the war crisis. The decision that came from the second Council of War's deliberations was that the BEF would at first deploy only four infantry divisions and its cavalry division, plus the extra cavalry brigade.¹³ The 4th Infantry Division under Major General Thomas D'O. Snow was held behind to reassure public opinion, deploying first to eastern England, and only starting to cross to France on the night of 22/23 August, about four days behind the main BEF. In consequence of this, the 4th Infantry Division did not arrive in time to take part in the Battle of Mons on Sunday 23 August. The 6th Infantry Division, the final infantry division of the BEF, made up of troops based in Ireland as well as Britain, did not cross to France until September.

On Friday 7 August, the day that his appointment as Secretary of State for War became official, Kitchener made his first public call for a mass volunteer army, starting with 100,000 men. This appeared in newspapers in the form of an advertisement: 'Your King and Country Need You / A Call To Arms / An addition of 100,000 men to His Majesty's Regular Army is immediately necessary in the present grave National Emergency / Lord Kitchener is confident that this appeal will be at once responded to by all who have the safety of our Empire at heart'.¹⁴ Over the weekend, 8,193 men were attested; there were very few social groups who could volunteer immediately and in a carefree spirit: chiefly the unemployed from one end of the social scale and the financially self-sufficient from the other, together with anyone without personal or professional commitments to leave behind; there was no immediate 'rush to the colours' on the outbreak of war. Kitchener's cabinet colleagues seem to have been largely bemused by his call for volunteers, some considering it as only a convenient way of absorbing the surplus unemployed in the workforce.¹⁵ But there was a precedent, well known to Kitchener for those who cared to notice, in the rush of British volunteers for the Anglo-Boer War, not so much on its outbreak in October 1899 as two months later in response to the triple British defeats of 'Black Week', a response that produced over 100,000 British volunteers in the course of that war (plus nearly half as many again who failed the Army medical test).¹⁶

Despite his well-known public contempt for the press, Kitchener also knew from his considerable previous experiences how to exploit it. A few days after his appointment, Kitchener gave an interview to Colonel Charles à Court Repington, the military correspondent of *The Times*, at the London home of Lady Wantage in Carleton Gardens.¹⁷ The old cliché that in August 1914 the war was generally expected in Britain to be over by Christmas has been convincingly overturned by historians, and the long article by Repington that appeared in *The Times* for Saturday 15 August is important evidence of Kitchener's own views on this. The article explained that the call was now for up to 500,000 volunteers, based on Britain expecting to fight a war that 'may be long, very long' and stressed the size and power of Germany and its military forces. The article also made reference to 'The Policy of Pitt' meaning Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger's strategy in the war against Napoleon, suggesting a chiefly naval war with further trained British troops being deployed to the continent at some time in the future, in support of the BEF. The article stated Kitchener's intention that for 'the Regular Army little or nothing will be changed,' and described his plan (which was later overtaken by events) to divide the Territorial Force into two categories, those willing to serve overseas and those only volunteering for home defence. Also, the article continued, 'on this occasion, when public spirit is high and so many hands are thrown out of work by the war, there has been a rush to join, and in a week or a fortnight the first 100,000 will be made up' to join what Repington called the New Army, with Kitchener's estimate that 'the new army may possibly be nearly ready for the field in six months'; enough in itself to disprove the 'over by Christmas' story.¹⁸

The impact of this *Times* article made Repington's prediction self-fulfilling, and by next Saturday 22 August (the day before the Battle of Mons), 101,939 men had put

themselves forward as volunteers. This was between twice and three times as many men as the Army normally had volunteer in a year in peacetime, and already enough to overwhelm the War Office's ability to cope with the probable influx. Obviously, not every volunteer's actions may be attributed solely to Kitchener's call through Repington and *The Times*. As recent historians' research has shown, recruiting was at first patchy across the country and across social groups; and the relatively low figures from most rural areas in August may simply have reflected the need to gather the harvest. But at least part of the foundation of the belief that the men had all volunteered swiftly and in high spirits was a direct product of Kitchener's need to stimulate recruitment, and Repington's obliging propaganda. If there can be said to be a typical response from the British population, it was shock at the news of war, a growing sense of concern at their country in danger, a desire to balance any willingness to volunteer against existing commitments to jobs and families, and in a society that was highly socially structured and deferential waiting for a lead from their national and local leaders, which was first provided by Kitchener's *Times* interview.¹⁹ Repington later claimed that Kitchener told him that they could have no more direct contact, since he was under pressure through his cabinet colleagues from other newspaper editors, furious that he had given *The Times* such an exclusive.²⁰

To continue the story it is necessary to return to Monday 27 July and the meeting of the Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee, where the press agreed to voluntarily submit to restriction of the news in the event of British involvement in the war. With war declared, on Wednesday 5 August, immediately after his appointment as Secretary of State for War, Kitchener together with Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty asked the prominent Conservative member of parliament F.E. Smith to create and head a new wartime Press Bureau, to act as a mouthpiece for all War Office, Admiralty, and other government department statements relating to the war, and as a point of contact for the press to submit pieces for censorship. F.E. Smith was an astute and experienced politician, and was not only a friend of Churchill's, but even an officer in the same Territorial mounted regiment, the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, meaning that he could take up his post immediately with the acting rank of full colonel. Despite the pre-war plans, the role of the Press Office was not well understood or agreed at first. The editor of the *Manchester Guardian* C.P. Scott described Smith 'as press-correspondent in intimate association with the Admiralty and War Office', and his appointment as a minor example of Asquith already creating a coalition government rather than a truly Liberal one.²¹ Asquith's wife Margot recorded her own understanding of how her husband described this: 'We've had a Press Committee, which we have also decided to have at Committee of [Imperial] Defence, to which papers can send a delegate; and we tell them what they may not publish'.²² 'Taffy' Gwynn, now editor of the Conservative London daily *Morning Post*, who generally approved of all things military, noted that 'The secrecy is tremendous and quite right'.²³ Although increasingly frustrated, newspapers and their owners largely remained sympathetic to the need for security, at least for the first four or five weeks of the war.

The first communiqué from the Press Bureau appeared on Tuesday 11 August, the day that the first troops of the BEF crossed to France, although the British press continued to observe silence on this matter.²⁴ No accredited reporters crossed with the BEF, and for a little over a week the London press was in a state of confusion as to how to respond to the War Office's behaviour. William Beach-Thomas of the *Daily Mail*, who in 1915 became an official war correspondent with the BEF, claimed in his memoirs that his newspaper had no designated war correspondent in August 1914, that the proprietor Lord Northcliffe (who also owned *The Times*) picked the sporting editor as suitable, that the War Office then told the man to buy a horse, and that he and other correspondents-in-waiting were seen for a few days exercising their horses in Hyde Park.²⁵ However, no permission to join the BEF as accredited

reporters was forthcoming; instead the newspapers' enquiries were met with various responses, the burden of which was that the BEF was moving within a media *cordon sanitaire*, a notional cocoon or bubble surrounding the troops within which any reporters were liable to arrest. Both at the time and ever since, this has been seen as a deliberate policy laid down by Kitchener. Despite the absence of firm evidence, there seems no reason to doubt that Kitchener's attitude played a very large part in it; but account needs also to be taken of the chaotic state of the War Office at the time, its many higher priorities than worrying about the press, and the unfamiliarity of some of its officers with the agreements that the press believed were already in place from before the war.

The response of the London newspapers and their correspondents to their neglect by the War Office (to use no stronger term) has many parallels in the history of war reporting: they went off to war regardless. Despite the self-censorship of the British press, the BEF's crossing to France and deployment had been freely reported in foreign newspapers, and its general location on the French-Belgian border was known. Some British reporters were already in France or in Belgium, others now journeyed to Paris or attached themselves to the French and Belgian armies; most began to pursue the BEF and a story, taking the prospect of temporary military arrest as part of the game. How close most of them came to the fighting in August is hard to determine, including from their own later accounts. Philip Gibbs of the *Daily Chronicle* claimed in his memoirs that with two other reporters he had interviewed British soldiers retreating from Mons on about the day after the battle; but this account is unsubstantiated and has some discrepancies, and it is likely that the first British reporters arrived with the BEF a few days later, just after the Battle of Le Cateau on Wednesday 26 August.²⁶

The two weeks following the BEF's concentration at Maubeuge on Thursday 20 August and advance into Belgium remained a period of uncertainty for the British public, but there was by no means a complete press blackout. While information reaching even Prime Minister Asquith and his colleagues was limited and uncertain, there were straws in the wind, and astute politicians could see which way that wind was blowing. On the day after Mons, Monday 24 August, Asquith wrote to his (probably platonic) mistress Venetia Stanley, 'The last thing French said to me when we took farewell in this room, was that we must be prepared for a reverse or two at first. And you know how disgusted I have been with the silly optimism of our press'.²⁷ Late on the same day the Press Bureau released a short communiqué, 'The British forces were engaged all day on Sunday and after dark with the enemy at Mons, and held their ground'; this was picked up next day by most newspapers, together with a second communiqué to the effect that the British had moved to new positions, and were being opposed by approximately equal numbers of Germans; *The Times*, although retaining a positive tone when describing the British withdrawal, assessed that across the front 'The battle is joined and so far has gone ill for the Allies'.²⁸ Also on Tuesday 25 August the British government published *The Belgian Official Report*, giving the first account by the Belgian government of German war crimes and attacks on civilians during their invasion of Belgium.²⁹ On the same day 10,019 men around the country volunteered for the Army, the first occasion on which the daily number had reached five figures. Two days later on Thursday 27 August a preliminary meeting took place in the House of Commons, followed by two more meetings in over the next three days, that laid the foundations of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, a cross-party committee to co-ordinate the efforts of local recruiting committees and to start to bring order to volunteering process.³⁰

As is well known, after fighting the Battle of Mons the BEF became divided at the start of its retreat, leading to its II Corps (3rd and 5th Infantry Divisions) having to stand and fight at the Battle of Le Cateau on Wednesday 26 August. Most of the fighting troops of Major General Snow's 4th Infantry arrived at Le Cateau by train on Monday 24 August,

began advancing towards the rest of the BEF next day, and then fell back again to Le Cateau as part of the general retreat, taking up its position with II Corps as part of the British defensive line. Snow's division had suffered from peacetime inadequacies and from its rushed deployment across the English Channel. It fought the Battle of Le Cateau without its divisional heavy artillery, its engineers, its supply train and ammunition column, its field ambulances (medical services), most of its signallers, and its divisional cavalry, who were used for scouting and to give early warning of danger. The division had even deployed without its field cookers, standard equipment used to provide hot meals in the field, and the troops were hungry as well as cold and wet by night, and then hot and thirsty by day from marching under the August sun.³¹

The German advance was stopped dead by the British stand at Le Cateau, quite literally in many cases. Having taken the heaviest casualties of any British division in battle so far, 3,158 men (excluding a large number of stragglers who later returned to their units), 4th Infantry Division retreated off the battlefield in the late afternoon, as part of the general British plan to halt the Germans, break contact, and resume the retreat. But the sight of the British soldiers walking away in groups struck some observers as resembling a disorganised mob. Colonel Victor Huguet, the French liaison officer with BEF headquarters, reported next day that 'conditions are such that for the moment the British army no longer exists'.³² There was virtually no effective German pursuit, but retreating in forced marches through the August heat, soldiers hallucinated from lack of sleep and dehydration, seeing phantom castles and friendly riders nearby. Commanders feared that if their men were allowed to rest they would never get them up again. Some formations of the 4th Infantry Division became lost from the main body for several days. On the day after Le Cateau, BEF headquarters issued orders for its retreating formations to abandon all unnecessary equipment and use the transport to carry their exhausted men; this was misinterpreted by 4th Infantry Division as an order to destroy all equipment as part of a *sauve qui peut* or general flight, and much equipment was burned before the order could be countermanded.³³ On the same day, two of 4th Infantry Division's battalion commanders, who were later court-martialled, attempted to surrender their battalions together with the town of Saint Quentin, and were only prevented by the intervention of British cavalry.³⁴

This was the situation when, on Thursday 27 and Friday 28 August, two British reporters, Hamilton Fyfe of the *Daily Mail* (who rather than riding a horse drove a Rolls-Royce) and Arthur Moore of *The Times*, came across retreating soldiers of 4th Infantry Division, mostly scattered and trying to find their parent units, but evidently prepared to talk to reporters. The story of what happened next was set out in some detail in the official history of *The Times* in 1952, complete with facsimile reproductions of the critical documents, and is generally supported by other accounts and sources, although there are some difficulties with it that may never be resolved.³⁵ Back at their hotel at Amiens on the morning of Saturday 29 August, Moore and Fyfe each wrote out his story, and these were sent back together to their respective newspapers. As was common among journalists, Moore's handwritten dispatch was composed as if he had written it on Saturday afternoon or evening, which is when he knew it would arrive at *The Times*'s headquarters at Printing House Square in London. Caught up in the drama of events, and drawing on what he had heard from lost, exhausted and in some cases traumatised soldiers, Moore identified the men that he had interviewed as from 'the Fourth Division, all that was left of 20,000 fine troops' and that it had been 'thrown into the fight at the end of a long march and had not even the time to dig trenches'. Pleading at the start of his article to the censor to allow its story to be told, Moore painted a vivid word-picture of 'straggling units,' of almost continuous 'desperate fighting' from Mons onwards, and of the Germans daily harassing the retreating British with 'Aeroplanes, Zeppelins, armoured motors and cavalry'. In fact the first Zeppelin airship raid took place on

the night of 5/6 August on Liege, and the German did have some armoured cars, but none were used against the British in the retreat from Mons. 'I have seen broken bits of many regiments', Moore continued, and men 'worn out with marching' who were nevertheless 'steady and cheerful, and wherever they arrive make straight for the proper authorities and seek news of their regiment'.³⁶

At Printing House Square, after reading through this dramatic document, which was about two newspaper columns long, *The Times's* acting editor George Freeman, together with foreign correspondent Henry Wickham Steed, blue-pencilled those parts of Moore's account which they believed would not survive censorship, and sent the manuscript to the Press Bureau. Significantly for the importance that German war crimes and atrocities were soon to have in British propaganda and recruiting, a paragraph on German atrocities in Belgium was deleted from the version sent to the censor, for reasons of space. After about two to three hours, shortly before midnight, the piece was returned with a note from F.E. Smith himself, actually re-instating several of the self-censored passages, and adding a concluding paragraph, written as a continuation of Moore's account and as if the author had been a witness to the events, 'The British Expeditionary Force, which bore the great weight of the [German] blow, has suffered terrible losses' but 'it needs men, men, and yet more men,' and that 'We want reinforcements and we want them now'. Even the identification of the 4th Infantry Division was not censored out, a breach of what would later become established practice. Smith also added a covering note, 'I am sorry to have censored this most able and interesting message so freely but the reasons are obvious. Forgive my clumsy journalistic suggestions but I beg you to use the parts of this article which I have passed to enforce the lesson – re-inforcements and re-inforcements at once'.³⁷ Interpreting Smith's 'suggestions' as a command, *The Times* made the unprecedented decision to run Moore's piece on the front page of a special edition on Sunday 30 August, by-lined 'from our 'from our special correspondent' and with the dateline 'Amiens August 29'; hence 'Amiens Dispatch'. Normally *The Times* ran only advertisements and personal messages on its front page, and was not published on Sundays (*The Sunday Times* appeared in the ordinary way on the same day leading with other stories). The headlines for Moore's story ran 'Mons and Cambrai / Losses of the British Army / Fight Against Severe Odds / Need for Reinforcements'. The rest of the front page included more general stories about the war in the west and the east, and the naval war. Some editions appear also have included material from Fyfe's piece, copied directly from another of Northcliffe's papers, the Sunday morning *Weekly Dispatch*, which was a sister paper to the *Daily Mail*.³⁸ The next day, Monday 31 August, over 30,000 men volunteered to join the Army.

What the public, and presumably *The Times's* staff, could not know was that the publication of the Amiens Dispatch coincided with a crisis in Asquith's government over communications between Kitchener at the War Office and Sir John French at BEF headquarters. Over the weekend Herbert and Margot Asquith were away from London visiting members of her family at her niece's home in Lympe, Kent, and later some wounded soldiers at Folkstone Hospital.³⁹ But on the Monday Asquith and his colleagues found themselves puzzling over a long and rambling telegram sent from Sir John French to the War Office, full of ambiguities, which called for a general attack while simultaneously appearing to demand that the BEF must be pulled out of the line. Asquith had already been facing with annoyance the prospect of complaints in the House of Commons over the decision to suspend the Government of Ireland Act. Now he also found himself facing criticisms and demands for information following the special edition of *The Times* with the Amiens Dispatch. He complained to Venetia Stanley that '*The Times* published a most wicked telegram on Sunday from a supposed correspondent at Amiens, describing the rout and desperation of our army,' although the report had denied that there had been any rout;

Margot Asquith, wrongly attributing the decision to publish to Geoffrey Dawson, *The Times*'s editor, complained to Andrew Bonar Law of the way that 'The article about our failures, which he published in Sunday's *Times* ([30] August 1914) was translated into every language and widely circulated'.⁴⁰ 'Taffy' Gwynne of the *Morning Post* was furious at what he saw as a security breach by *The Times*, writing angry letters to Asquith and to others (including Charles Masterman, who had just been asked to set up Wellington House), as well as denouncing *The Times* in his editorials, to the point at which Dawson asked for a meeting with Gwynne on 'neutral ground'.⁴¹

The popular response to the Amiens Dispatch reproduced, on a vastly larger scale, the volunteerism following the defeats of Black Week in the Anglo-Boer War, in reaction to what was portrayed as a defeat and a national crisis rather than a mood of exuberance. Over the following week up to Monday 7 September, 174,901 volunteers came forward, by far the largest single number for any week of the war, causing the Army recruiting system to collapse by mid-week, with men's names being taken before they were sent home again because the Army could not process them. This was a formidable piece of recruiting propaganda. But there is good evidence that in passing the Amiens Dispatch and adding his own call for recruits, F.E. Smith (who was, after all, an opposition Conservative member of parliament) had acted without reference to the government, which did not welcome his actions. Following the publication of the special edition of *The Times* on the Sunday morning, at 3.40 pm the War Office issued through the Press Bureau a communiqué (which according to Asquith was written by Churchill) describing in measured tones the events from Mons to Le Cateau as a 'four days battle' but adding that since Thursday 26 August the BEF had been unmolested except by German cavalry patrols, and had received twice the number of reinforcements as its losses, ending that 'the army is ready for the next encounter, undaunted in spirit'.⁴² This was followed by a statement from the Press Bureau at 11.10 pm, that though it did not forbid publication of reports from the war zone, such stories 'should be received with extreme caution. No correspondents are at the front, and their information, however honestly sent, is therefore derived at second or third hand from persons who are often in no position to tell coherent stories'.⁴³

These Press Bureau correctives appeared in London newspapers on Monday, simultaneously with questions being asked about the Amiens Dispatch in the House of Commons first to Asquith, and then in the evening to F.E. Smith. Asquith began by describing the publication as a 'very regrettable exception' to the patriotic restraint shown by the press, and announced that the government had that very day made new arrangements for providing the public with information about the BEF; what these arrangements would become apparent a week later.⁴⁴ In response to Asquith's criticisms, *The Times* sent a statement to the House of Commons which was read into the parliamentary record, and next day, Tuesday 1 September, it published additional statements on the circumstances, pointing out that 'we published it in accordance with the official request', although certainly neither Smith nor anyone in government had called for a special Sunday edition to be created for the purpose.⁴⁵ Smith spoke for about an hour, starting by claiming that 'I never sought the office that I hold,' and embarking on a history of government-press relations up to that date, starting with the Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee. When he eventually reached the circumstances of the Amiens Dispatch, he pointed out that 'no war correspondents were being allowed at the front, and that there was the greatest anxiety, and legitimate anxiety, to obtain any information as to the fortunes of the campaign', that being passed by the censor did not actually mean government endorsement of the report, and that his addition of a call for reinforcements 'was in order to carry out what I knew to be the policy of the War Office'.⁴⁶ Smith was to resign at his own request from heading the Press Bureau before the end of September. The entire sequence of events leading both to and from the Amiens

Dispatch arose from confusion within the government over propaganda, and from the lack of a system that had been agreed and understood by the press itself of accreditation for reporters, and of press handling and censorship.

But this is not quite the end of the story. In the heightened atmosphere of Monday 31 August, a second telegram was received by Kitchener from Sir John French at BEF headquarters just before midnight, which was interpreted as evidence of panic in BEF headquarters, an assessment which is contradicted by the evidence of junior officers who noted French's calmness and confidence that day. Of several possible explanations, the most plausible is that French, who was a poor prose stylist, had composed the telegrams himself rather than entrust them to a staff officer. Asquith's response, as he described it to Venetia Stanley, was to send Kitchener out to France 'to unravel the situation and if necessary put the fear of God in them all'.⁴⁷ Kitchener and French met on Tuesday 1 September; exactly what they said to each other is unknown: Kitchener never spoke of the meeting and French's memoirs are unreliable. But the result was a formal order (or 'instruction' to use the official term) from Kitchener to French that the BEF would cease its retreat and turn to take part in the Battle of the Marne, the decisive French Army counterstroke that ended the German threat to win the war quickly. But by remaining in action the BEF also lost in total 31,709 casualties up to 4 October, destroying a large part of the stock of experienced officers that might have commanded the new armies that Kitchener was raising. While obviously the Amiens Dispatch was not the chief factor in this sequence of events, it was an important addition to the general atmosphere of stress and crisis within which Asquith's and Kitchener's decisions were made.

Also on Monday 31 August, at its third meeting in the House of Commons, the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee was officially created. Soon famous for its recruiting posters, the main function of this committee was not at first to promote recruiting, but to seek to bring to it some kind of order by encouraging and supporting local recruiting committees. While the official and central recruiting system was temporarily in a state of collapse, local recruiters who believed that they had been given a clear lead, as well as a call for more recruits through the press, temporarily took over the process. It was late September 1914 that saw the great eruption of local and regional recruiting which led to the famous Pals Battalions, infantry units recruited locally, often from friends and workmates. At their high point in October 1914, 84 new battalions were raised locally, compared with 19 raised through the official War Office machinery.⁴⁸ Finally, on Monday 7 September, the peak of recruiting stimulated by the Amiens Dispatch, the change to government policy on reporters with the BEF announced by Asquith a week earlier came into force. While the details of how the decision was made remain unknown, Kitchener had taken his old idea from the Anglo-Boer War even further, by appointing a serving officer who was also an experienced writer, Colonel Ernest Swinton, to BEF headquarters to write under the by-line 'Eyewitness,' as the sole British official reporter on the Western Front.⁴⁹ This arrangement, which pleased no-one, lasted until spring 1915, when Swinton was at first joined and then replaced by accredited newspaper reporters with BEF headquarters.

Although, as has been repeatedly stressed, the Amiens Dispatch was not the sole cause of any major subsequent event, without its publication the British news blackout on the Western Front might have continued for much longer than it did. Also and more speculatively, the BEF might not have fought in the Battle of the Marne; and the Pals Battalions might not have been created in such large numbers.

¹ For the 1878 recommendations see The National Archives, Kew (TNA) WO 33/32 'Newspaper Correspondents with an Army in the Field and Military Attachés of Foreign Powers at Head-Quarters', 1878.

² See Stephen Badsey, 'War Correspondents in the Boer War,' in John Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War – Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 187-202; the quotation from Kitchener is p. 201.

³ TNA CAB 17/91 'Control of Press', which includes a draft parliamentary 'Publication of Naval and Military Information Act' of 1905 with the preamble as quoted.

⁴ TNA CAB 17/91 'Control of Press', CID memorandum 'Control of the Press' summarising these plans, 13 November 1911; and 'Report and Proceedings' of the standing subcommittee, 1913.

⁵ TNA DEFE 53/1 'A, WO, AM and P C, Minutes of Meetings 5 November 1912 to July 1939', including the Memorandum on the establishment of the standing committee (the abbreviation stands for 'Admiralty, War Office, Air Ministry [from 1918] and Press Committee').

⁶ Charles Edward Callwell, *Experiences of a Dug-Out 1914-1918* (London: Constable, 1920) pp. 258-9; Simon Batten, "'A School for Leaders": What did the British Army learn from the 1912 Army manoeuvres?' *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Volume 93 Number 373 Spring 2015 pp. 25-47

⁷ Lucy Masterman, *C.F.G. Masterman: A Biography* (London: Frank Cass, [1939] 1968) pp. 272-3; Michael Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982) pp. 38-40.

⁸ TNA DEFE 53/1 'A, WO, AM and P C, Minutes of Meetings 5 November 1912 to July 1939', minutes of the meeting for Monday 27 July 1914; [George Riddell], *Lord Riddell's War Diary 1914-1918* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1933) pp. 1-3.

⁹ TNA DEFE 53/1 'A, WO, AM and P C, Minutes of Meetings 5 November 1912 to July 1939', minutes of the meeting for Wednesday 30 July 1914.

¹⁰ George H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War: British Strategy from 1914 to 1916* (Washington: Brassey's, 2004) pp. 19-26; Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012) pp. 201-2.

¹¹ Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1902-1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Stephen Badsey, 'Sir John French and Command of the BEF', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion, 2013) pp. 27-50.

¹² Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972) pp. 295-300; Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace* (London: Profile, 2013) p. 303.

¹³ TNA CAB 22/1 'Secretary's notes of a War Council held at 10 Downing Street August 5, 1914' and 'Secretary's notes of a War Council held at 10 Downing Street August 6, 1914'; Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012) pp. 201-3.

¹⁴ An example of this advertisement may be found as 'The Army,' *The Times* Friday 7 August 1914, p. 5.

¹⁵ XXXXX Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012) pp. 232-4.

¹⁶ Steven M. Miller, *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain's Citizen Soldiers and the South African War 1899-1902* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007) p. 57.

¹⁷ C. à Court Repington, *The First World War 1914-1918*, (London: Constable, 1920) Volume 1, p. 21.

¹⁸ ‘Lord Kitchener's Plan by Our Military Correspondent’, *The Times*, Saturday 15 August 1914; p. 7; Stuart Halifax, ‘“Over By Christmas”: British popular opinion and the short war in 1914’ *First World War Studies*, Volume 1 Number 2, October 2010 pp. 103-122.

¹⁹ David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War 1914-1916* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), pp. 15-48; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 143-162; Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 70-111; Laura Ugolini, *Civvies: Middle-Class Men on the English Home Front 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) pp. 32-60.

²⁰ C. à Court Repington, *The First World War 1914-1918*, (London: Constable, 1920) Volume 1, p. 22.

²¹ Trevor Wilson (ed.) *The Political Diaries of C.P. Scott 1911-1928* (London: Collins, 1970) p. 100.

²² Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock (eds), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 6, entry for 29 August 1914; Margot Asquith's diary was not a day-by-day record but written up at irregular intervals from notes that she kept.

²³ Keith Wilson (ed.), *The Rasp of War: The Letters of H.A. Gwynn to The Countess Bathurst 1914-1918* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1988) p. 20, Gwynn to Bathurst, 5 August 1914.

²⁴ Michael Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982) pp. 19-20.

²⁵ William Beach-Thomas, *A Traveller in News* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1925) p. 56.

²⁶ Philip Gibbs, *Now It Can Be Told* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1920) pp. 4-6; Philip Gibbs, *The Pageant of the Years* (London: William Heinemann, 1946) pp. 143-7.

²⁷ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 24 August 1914, p. 191.

²⁸ ‘British Army's Stern Fight’, and ‘Namur Lost’ *The Times*, Tuesday 25 August 1914 p.6; Martin J. Farrar, *News From the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Sutton, 1988) pp. 16-19.

²⁹ David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War 1914-1916* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 23; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 145.

³⁰ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp. 69-61.

³¹ Sir James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1914, Volume I*, History of the Great War based on Official Documents (London: HMSO, 1922) pp. 121-146.

³² Quoted in Nikolas Gardner, *Trial By Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport Conn., Praeger, 2003), p. 60.

³³ Cited in many accounts, e.g. Nikolas Gardner, *Trial By Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport Conn., Praeger, 2003), p. 61.

³⁴ This is a well-known and now well-documented story which for understandable reasons did not appear in the British official history of the campaign; see the account by the senior cavalry officer involved, Sir Tom Bridges, *Alarms and Excursions* (London: Longmans

Green, 1938) pp.85-8, and John Hutton, *August 1914: Surrender at St Quentin* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010).

³⁵ [anon.] *The History of The Times: The 150th Anniversary and Beyond 1912-1948 Part I 1912-1920* (London: Printing House Square, 1952), pp. 222-7; Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmworth, *Northcliffe* (London: Cassell, 1959) p. 469; Martin J. Farrar, *News From the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Sutton, 1988) pp. 18-23.

³⁶ All quotations are from 'Mons and Cambrai,' *The Times*, Sunday August 30, 1914 p. 1

³⁷ Quotation and facsimile of the letter in [anon.] *The History of The Times: The 150th Anniversary and Beyond 1912-1948 Part I 1912-1920* (London: Printing House Square, 1952), pp. 222-3.

³⁸ It is stated in *The Times's* history [anon.] *The History of The Times: The 150th Anniversary and Beyond 1912-1948 Part I 1912-1920* (London: Printing House Square, 1952), p. 225 that extracts from Fyffe's despatch appeared 'beside' Moore's, with headlines 'German Tidal Wave / Our Soldiers Overwhelmed by Numbers / Plain Duty of the Nation; and other accounts confirm that material from both correspondents appeared; but the version of the front page of *The Times* for 30 August 1914 held by the British Library does not show this.

³⁹ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 30 August 1914, pp. 139-40; Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock (eds), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 28, entries for 30-31 August 1914.

⁴⁰ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 31 August 1914, p. 209; Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock (eds), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 32, entry for 4 September 1914.

⁴¹ Keith Wilson (ed.), *The Rasp of War: The Letters of H.A. Gwynn to The Countess Bathurst 1914-1918* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1988) p. 26, Gwynn to Bathurst, 1 September 1914; Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 31 August 1914, p. 209; Letter H.A. Gwynne to Charles Masterman, 31 August 1914, Papers of Charles Masterman CFGM 6/5/1/3, Cadbury research Library, University of Birmingham.

⁴² This Press Bureau communiqué is quoted in full in 'British Forces Intact,' *The Times*, Monday 31 August 1914, p.8; the attribution to Churchill is in Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 31 August 1914, p. 209.

⁴³ This communiqué is quoted in full in a later edition of *The Times* on the same day, 'Four Days Battle,' *The Times*, Monday 31 August 1914, p.8.

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), House of Commons, Monday 31 August 1914, Volume 66 cc. 372-4 Statement by the Prime Minister.

⁴⁵ 'The Attacks on The Times,' *The Times*, Tuesday 1 September 1914, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), House of Commons, Monday 31 August 1914, Volume 66 cc. 454-511 statements by F.E. Smith.

⁴⁷ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Asquith to Venetia 1 September 1914, p. 213; for this controversial episode see Stephen Badsey, 'Sir John French and Command of the BEF', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion, 2013) pp. 46-8.

⁴⁸ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp. 61-2 and pp. 79-80.

⁴⁹ Ernest D. Swinton, *Eyewitness* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp. 52-4.