BOOTS ON THE GROUND

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BRITAIN AND HER ARMY SINCE 1945

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THE LEGACY OF WAR

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Almost one year after the D-Day landings in Normandy and one month after Montgomery had met representatives of the German High Command at Lüneburg Heath, Allied commanders in Berlin formalised victory. On 5 June 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States, Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov of the Soviet Union and Général d'Armée Jean de Lattre de Tassigny for France, together with the British Field Marshal, signed the Berlin Declaration. Kept hanging about by the Soviet delegation, Montgomery and Eisenhower had become decidedly testy.[1] It seemed to confirm Monty's misgivings about the Russians. The Declaration stated that the German armed forces on land, at sea and in the air had been completely defeated and had surrendered unconditionally. 'Germany, which bears responsibility for the war, is no longer capable of resisting the will of the victorious Powers.' Emphasising the Allies' dominance, it added: 'The Governments of the United Kingdom, the United States of America, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Provisional Government of the French Republic hereby assume supreme authority with respect to Germany, including all the powers possessed by the German Government, the High Command and any state, municipal, or local government or authority.'[2] The formal Occupation of Germany was underway. The Berlin Declaration underlined the ending of the war

with Germany, but for Monty, as his *Memoirs* spell out, 'Difficulties with the Russians begin.'[3]

During the years following the Allied victory, the aftershocks of war continued. As the Four Powers sought to shape Germany, Europe and the wider world and to impose some sort of order on the chaos and devastation, peace seemed little more than the absence of formal conflict. On the home front, bankrupt and exhausted, Britain had somehow to rebuild – and to create a very different country from that of 1939. The new Labour government, elected by an unexpected landslide in July 1945, was given a mandate to introduce a welfare state. Building this new Jerusalem at home had to be balanced against the demands of empire overseas. However, the Empire was threatening to fracture, cracking under nationalist demands for independence and self-government, whether in India, Burma, Malaya, across Africa or in Palestine and the wider Middle East.

The Occupation of Germany was just one of the many missions undertaken by the British Army after June 1945. While millions of soldiers would be demobilised – the Army's strength falling from 2.9 million to 364,000 by 1950 – the introduction of peacetime National Service was approved by Parliament in 1947 to try to meet the demands for military manpower.[4] By then, the relations between the Communist East and the West were deteriorating, fulfilling the predictions of British service chiefs, including Montgomery, that the threat to Britain and her Empire would come not from a resurgent Germany but from the Soviet Union.

Against the backdrop of austerity at home, this chapter explores how Britain and her Army struggled to come to terms with the legacy of the Second World War in Germany, Palestine and India. East–West rivalries would come to be played out in Germany, leading to the formal division of both country and continent, and the frozen hostilities of the Cold War. On the frontline of this new conflict were the soldiers of the British Army of the Rhine. The development of nuclear weapons, seen with the bombing of Japan in August 1945, would add another, deadlier, dimension to any possible future war.

Britain, Her Army and the Aftermath of World War

In 1945, Britain was a global power, with global interests and global responsibilities. The last of the Allied conferences, held in Potsdam

between July and August, underscored that, if no longer the world's paramount power, Britain was still one of the Big Three. As the war with Japan continued, fought by the soldiers of the so-called 'Forgotten Army', this gathering of the victors emphasised the uncertainties that accompanied peace in Europe. President Roosevelt had recently died and, part way through proceedings, Churchill was voted out of office. The British General Election of 25 July brought a Labour majority of 146. Perhaps more suited to the grinding slog of peace was the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee – 'a sheep in sheep's clothing', according to the colossus he replaced – and the less-than-flamboyant new President of the United States, Harry S. Truman. The *de facto* Soviet dominance of eastern Europe was reflected by the recognition given to the new Moscow-backed government of Poland. Germany lost 25 per cent of her land as her border was moved westwards. A few days after the conference ended, the United States signalled her supremacy – and introduced a new paradigm in strategic and military thinking – with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Afterwards, at midnight on 15 August, Prime Minister Attlee declared, 'The last of our enemies is laid low.' The world was once again, briefly, at peace.

In the six years of conflict since 1939 when Germany invaded Poland, more than 5 million men and women had served in the British Armed Forces, 3.5 million of them in the Army. The roll call of campaigns, battles and operations in which those soldiers took part – Dunkirk, El Alamein, Normandy, Arnhem, Burma – is now etched in the British psyche. For the first time, the civilian Home Front had become one of the theatres of operation. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris stated that Bomber Command 'had always worked on the principle that bombing anything in Germany is better than bombing nothing'.[5] Luftwaffe commanders probably thought the same about Britain. The Blitz, followed by the development and deployment of the V-1 and V-2 missiles, brought unprecedented destruction to British cities in an attempt to undermine national morale. It failed. The 'Blitz spirit' – a cheery stoicism in the face of adversity – today remains a source of national pride and inspiration. Those months in the summer of 1940 leading up to the Battle of Britain when 'The Few' of the RAF deterred a German invasion were surely the most perilous in our island's history. However, by the end of the following

year, Britain was no longer standing alone; the country was now allied against the Axis forces with the United States and, more unexpectedly, the Soviet Union – the latter bearing out Lord Palmerston's observation that, 'It is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy.' During the war, some 383,000 British service personnel and more than 60,000 civilians were killed.

The end of conflict had brought an end to the coalition government. Led by Churchill, it had been a successful proving ground for Labour ministers such as Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison. Labour's landslide election victory reflected the birth of a new Britain. This welfare state, which would have at its core a system of social security and a National Health Service, had been outlined in a White Paper written by William Beveridge. Published in late 1942, this policy document became an unlikely bestseller, with 635,000 copies bought by the public.[6] The writer toured the country, outlining his vision of a nation free from want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness. Labour's programme of social reform was matched by proposals for industrial change, including the nationalisation of key sectors such as energy and the railways. Unemployment, the scourge of the 1930s, had been cut to 84,000 in January 1944, down from 2 million just five years earlier; at the same time, trade union membership stood at 8 million.[7] The six years of conflict had eroded class differences; according to one, perhaps rather surprised, campaigner: 'I think one was acutely aware that, for the first time in my life anyway, everybody during the war was more or less equal.'[8] War had brought collectivism to Britain, together with the expansion of state control over most aspects of life, particularly the economy. In voting Labour, as the majority of servicemen and women did, the British people indicated that they did not want pre-war Britain reconstructed, but a very different country.

A 'financial Dunkirk' confronted Britain within weeks of the election, according to the economist John Maynard Keynes. Going from the world's creditor to debtor, the country was cleaned out by war, despite Lend-Lease from the United States partly financing the effort. The Americans had not been averse to obtaining the best possible deal when Britain sought financial help in the pursuit of victory, something that did not change with the advent of peace. The United

States economy had not done too badly: by 1945, US GDP and industrial capacity had more than doubled in five years, while Britain had been forced to sell one-quarter of her overseas investments to pay for imports. There was also a massive deficit in the balance of payments with the dollar. On 21 August, President Truman abruptly terminated Lend-Lease, news of which fell on Whitehall like a V-2, without warning.[9] Keynes was immediately dispatched to Washington to negotiate a loan, not least to continue paying for the defence of the Empire and other overseas commitments. Many Americans, both policymakers and the public, had a longstanding antipathy to imperialism, exacerbated by the British policy of imperial preference and ever-higher trade barriers erected throughout the 1930s. In exchange for a $3.75 billion loan, which was finally paid off in 2006, the British had to accept free trade and the convertibility of sterling. As Conservative MP L. S. Amery observed: 'The British Empire is the oyster which this loan is to prise open.' While some breathing space was gained by the loan Keynes negotiated, the money was soon running out.

In 1945, the Empire remained at the heart of British foreign policy and military strategy. The country's financial difficulties were assumed to be temporary – certainly in the Foreign Office, now led by former trade union leader Ernest Bevin. Officials warned that the financial issue would need careful handling, 'otherwise other countries will say the lion is in his dotage and will divide up his skin'.[10] On the other side of Horse Guards Parade, maps in the War Office showed scores of British military bases, the garrisons of Empire, stretching from Gibraltar, Cyprus and Malta in the Mediterranean to Palestine and Egypt, and then beyond 'East of Suez', to India, Burma and across Asia to Hong Kong. In Africa, there were British military outposts scattered from Cairo to Cape Town. Singapore might have fallen in 1942 but, with victory in the East, few would have considered this to be of lasting significance, as Britain re-established control over the colonies that had been occupied by the Japanese. Other areas, notably the oil-rich Middle East, were not part of the formal Empire but were regarded as coming under Britain's sphere of influence. A commitment to the newly established United Nations did not diminish the parallel commitment to Empire and Commonwealth. Somehow, the demands of Empire overseas had to be balanced with radical social reform at home.

What if Britain had cut and run from her imperial obligations? The temptation to pack up, lower the flag and ship out must have been great. Balanced against this should be a consideration of the destabilisation that could follow any premature withdrawal. In the early twenty-first century, after long-established regimes were overthrown, the impact of a power vacuum became apparent in Iraq and Libya. Failed and failing states, including Yemen and Somalia, led to millions of refugees and the exodus of migrants. The end of war in 1945 provoked a similar humanitarian crisis in Europe, which British soldiers tried to contain. Part of the reason for this was the westward flight across the continent from the Russians, described as 'savages' by von Friedeburg at Lüneburg Heath to an unmoved Montgomery.[11] The Attlee government and its successors were neither oblivious nor unsympathetic to nationalists' demands; however they were alive to the threat of an increasingly predatory Soviet Union, which cast a shadow over the Middle East, particularly Persia, and whose grip on eastern Europe tightened by the day. In 1946, one Moscow-based diplomat stated in a dispatch: 'Soviet security has become hard to distinguish from Soviet imperialism and it is becoming uncertain whether there is, in fact, any limit to Soviet expansion.'[12] The perception of such expansionist ambitions, together with the Marxist sympathies of some agitating for independence from Britain (or indeed, from France), provided the justification for resisting nationalist demands in colonies such as Malaya. In March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill described how an 'iron curtain' of Soviet domination had fallen from Stettin to Trieste and lamented that this was not the liberated Europe that had been fought for. He added: 'Nor is it one which contains the essentials of permanent peace.'[13]

After 1945, competing demands led to a parallel process of demobilisation out of the Armed Forces and conscription into them. Troops were needed to garrison the Empire, to stabilise western Europe, particularly in Germany and Greece, and, increasingly, for defence against any possible Soviet attack. However, post-war austerity Britain, where rationing continued, needed investment and manpower, not least to rebuild shattered housing stock and infrastructure. On Election Day in 1945, almost 5 million forces personnel were still in uniform. Demobilisation got underway, with 1.35 million servicemen and women leaving the forces between June and December

1945.[14] As they collected their demob suits, back pay and ration cards, and formally returned to civilian life, millions of others stayed on duty. Although the demob process was far better organised than in 1918, it was still somewhat sluggish. Personnel were divided into two classes: 90 per cent were classed as A; those in the B class, in jobs such as engineering and mining that were key to the reconstruction effort, could effectively jump the demob queue. The A class majority were further classified into groups according to age and length of service, with the longest serving leaving soonest, including those still overseas who would be returned home. Officers and men were to be treated equally.[15] Overseen by Bevin, the scheme was a small symbol of the more fair and socially equal Britain that the Attlee government sought to achieve. However, after V-J Day, many service personnel – but especially those stationed in Britain – chafed against being kept hanging about in uniform with little to do, losing out in the race for jobs and homes. Some men called up in 1944 would not be discharged until 1948.[16] The return to civilian life disoriented some; after the dangers, excitement and comradeship of war, the drabness of home life was anticlimactic. The divorce rate rocketed, up from 4,100 in 1935 to 60,300 in 1947.[17]

With victory and the Armed Forces' job effectively over, the nation's focus was on peace and reconstruction. Montgomery, the Empire's senior soldier in June 1946 when he became Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), was keen that the Army should not be forgotten. Political minds, however, seemed to be concentrated on the creation of the welfare state: 'The state of the world, British commitments overseas and a long term plan for the Armed Forces all seemed to have been pushed into the background'. Monty was not going to tolerate any peacetime backsliding: 'The British Army must not, as after World War I, be allowed to drift aimlessly without a policy or a doctrine.'[18] His ambitious plans required a 'New Model Army' of well-trained long-service professional regular soldiers, augmented by short-service conscripts; in times of crisis, these former conscripts, who had kept their skills up to speed in the Territorial Army, would be recalled. Unashamed about 'making a nuisance of myself in Whitehall', the CIGS relied on his celebrity rather than his political skills to fight the Army's corner.

In 1947, a single Ministry of Defence with its own minister

was inaugurated. The three ministers who oversaw the three services were effectively demoted; they were no longer members of the Cabinet, although until 1964 they were members of the Cabinet Defence Committee (CDC). The service chiefs – the CIGS, the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Air Staff – formed the Chiefs of Staff Committee. In addition, the CDC, comprising the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretaries of State for the Colonies, Dominions and Foreign Affairs among others, oversaw all defence matters, including preparations for war.[19] Until 1964 each service also retained its own ministry, with the Army being run from the War Office: key to its management was the Army Council and the Executive Committee of the Army Council (later the Army Board and Executive Committee of the Army Board). Unlike in later decades, many politicians had first-hand experience of service life, including Churchill, Attlee, Eden and Macmillan. From 1946 an annual Statement on Defence was presented to Parliament: this subsequently became the Statement on Defence Estimates. Separate were the major defence reviews, less than a dozen of which were undertaken between the 1957 Sandys Review and the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review.

By 1947, relations with the Soviet Union were increasingly strained. For the Army's senior commanders, the possibility of conflict was never far away. The Ten Year Rule – the 1919 policy guideline which stated that Britain would not be involved in another major war for a decade – had not been reintroduced. While on a downward trend, the strength of the Armed Forces was unprecedented for peacetime: the overall number of forces personnel was 1,255,000, while the Army's strength stood at almost 775,000. This would fall to 450,000 in 1948, the maximum combined strength of all Britain's Armed Forces before the war.[20] *Future Defence Policy*, a report issued by the Chiefs of Staff in 1947, looked ahead and stated that, while the likelihood of war in the following five years was small, 'The most likely and most formidable threat to our interests comes from Russia, especially from 1956 onwards.' It gave little sense of any diminution in Britain's status: the country must fulfil its responsibilities to the United Nations, the Commonwealth and 'also to herself as a Great Power'. 'Essential' was retaining 'at a high state of readiness properly balanced Armed Forces'.[21] In 1948 the so-called Three Pillars strategy

confirmed priorities: homeland defence; defence of vital sea lanes; and the defence of the Middle East, crucial for oil supplies.

In 1947, Parliament approved the introduction of peacetime conscription – National Service – for the first time in Britain's history. Although massive when seen in a historic context, the existing and projected strength of the Armed Forces was simply not enough to fulfil Britain's commitments, which, the new Defence Minister reminded the House of Commons, included Germany, Palestine and the wider Middle East, as well as India, Malaya and Hong Kong.[22] The twelve-month stint was to be introduced in January 1949, but this plan was overtaken by events: instead National Service was extended first to eighteen months and then to two years. The opposition of some politicians to compulsory military service was matched by senior commanders' wariness. Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in India, observed: 'The British Army by reason of its traditions, organization and widespread duties is almost certainly the most difficult of all modern armies to which to apply the principle of National Service.'[23] One MP considered that the Army's optimum readiness would be undermined 'if Forces are preoccupied with trainees and contain a very large proportion of short-service men'.[24] The Army accounted for the largest number of the conscripts: in 1953, out of a total intake of 154,064 men, 113,611 entered the Army, compared with just 3,544 joining the Royal Navy.[25]

The call-up became a rite of passage for Britain's young men – to be endured or enjoyed. For many, it was 'an education in getting on with people'.[26] National Service was the first time many left home:

> He is straight away pitchforked into the rough and ready life of the Army of Private Tommy Atkins and bawling sergeant majors. Barrack room manners are perfunctory. There is no opportunity for privacy. Bad language is a ritual of soldiers' speech, and sex – the one outside interest common to all of them – is persistently and publicly discussed.[27]

Registration, a medical examination and enlistment would be followed by eight weeks of basic training. National Servicemen earned 28s. a week during their first six months' service: pay then varied between 35s. and 84s. per week for a private and between 73s. 6d. and