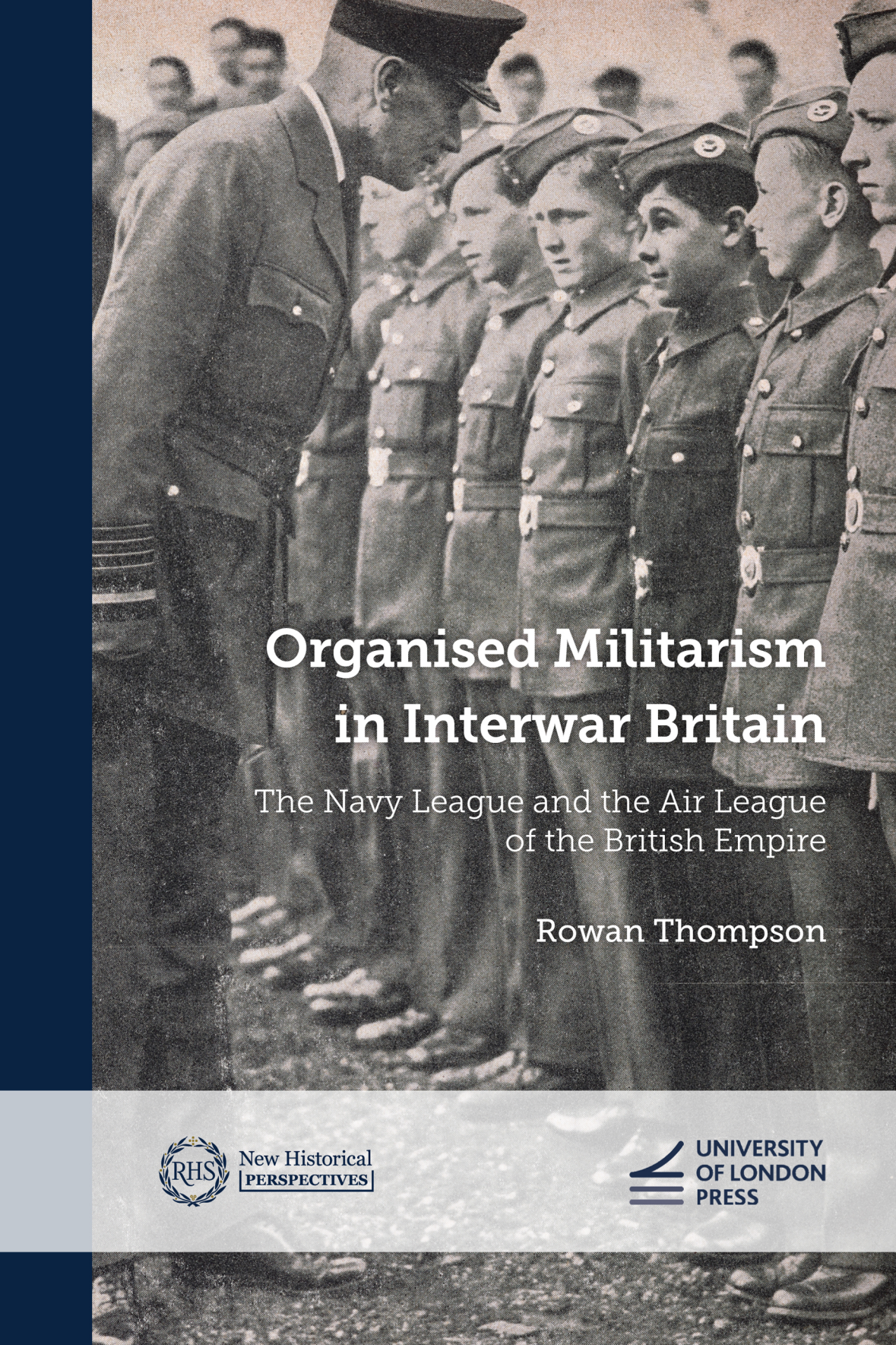




Organised Militarism in Interwar Britain

The Navy League and the Air League
of the British Empire

Rowan Thompson



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List of abbreviations

ADCC	Air Defence Cadet Corps
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AL	Air League
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
ATC	Air Training Corps
BL	British Library
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science
BNB	Boys' Naval Brigade
BSUASC	Ball State University, Archives and Special Collections
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CAC	Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge
CWAC	City of Westminster Archives Centre
EAD	Empire Air Day
GCM	Grand Council Meeting
IAPF	International Air Police Force
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IML	Imperial Maritime League
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LCC	London County Council
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
LNU	League of Nations Union
MEC	Meeting of the Executive Committee
NAL	National Aerospace Library (Royal Aeronautical Society)
NCS	New Commonwealth Society
NFWI	National Federation of Women's Institutes
NL	Navy League

NLA	National League of Airmen
NLAR	Navy League Annual Report
NLSCS	Navy League Seafarers' Comfort Supply
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NRS	National Records of Scotland
PAC	Parliamentary Air Committee
PPU	Peace Pledge Union
RA	Royal Archives
RAC	Royal Aero Club
RAeS	Royal Aeronautical Society
RAF	Royal Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
SBAC	Society of British Aircraft Constructors
SCC	Sea Cadet Corps
TLA	The London Archives
TNA	The National Archives
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
WAL	Women's Aerial League

Introduction

In *The Private Manufacture of Armaments* (1936), Philip Noel-Baker, Labour MP and League of Nations Union (LNU) stalwart, reflected that

The growth of democratic government during the last half-century has brought with it the formation of propaganda societies of many kinds, and, as the years have passed, the importance of such societies has tended to increase. Among such societies there are now in various countries organisations which claim they are ‘patriotic,’ and which devote their efforts to propaganda on issues of National Defence . . . It is for that purpose that they are formed; if they ceased to fulfil it they would quickly disappear.¹

Considering the relationship between ‘patriotic’ societies, private armament manufacturers and questions of national defence in interwar Britain, Noel-Baker focused on two organisations in particular – the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire. In his inquiry, Noel-Baker criticised the activities of both leagues in relation to disarmament, collective security and the post-war spirit of internationalism. He noted the scope, scale and motivation of the Navy and Air Leagues’ considerable propaganda campaigns, asking ‘[w]hat do the “patriotic” societies preach in their lectures, their articles, their leaflets, and in the speeches of their leaders? How do they expound the value of Sea and Air Power?’ For Noel-Baker, the meaning of such propaganda could be summed up in two words: ‘great armaments’.²

Noel-Baker’s investigation into the Navy and Air Leagues appears at first glance rather curious. After all, the interwar period is often characterised by the rise of pacifism, internationalism and anti-war sentiment. There exists a long-standing historical orthodoxy which maintains that ‘popular British militarism after 1918 had nowhere very much to go’, that the ‘post-war world was not a hospitable place for militaristic Edwardian patriotic leagues’ and even that there was a ‘dissolution of organized militarism’

following the First World War.³ Indeed, if Britain had become a ‘peaceable kingdom’ – ‘a nation where both state and people had renounced the barbarism of war and turned their back on the “militarist spirit” that it had fostered’ – then there should have been little place for organisations such as the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire.⁴

This book provides an alternative account of organised militarism in interwar Britain. It argues that institutional, ideological, cultural and popular forms of militarism were able to enjoy significant resonance despite the competing growth of anti-war sentiment, pacifism, liberal internationalism, support for disarmament and collective security, and the popularity of peace movements. While militaristic and patriotic organisations formed an important part of Edwardian political culture, the First World War invariably marks a terminus for histories of organised militarism. Yet, many aspects of Edwardian militarism endured beyond the 1914–18 conflict. Popular and political manifestations of militarism – militaristic leagues, martial values, paramilitary youth organisations, the political promotion of naval, aerial and military power, and the staging of military forms of commemoration, ritual and theatre – all survived, and even flourished, in the post-war period.

As its focus, *Organised Militarism in Interwar Britain* explores the aims, ideas and activities of the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire – two extra-parliamentary organisations established to promote naval and aerial supremacy respectively. It examines how both leagues mobilised broad public and political support and what the story of each organisation tells us about the impact of war on British society and culture, civil–military relations, political and private activism, military theatre and commemoration, youth, and the politics of disarmament, collective security, internationalism and national defence. At its core, the book is concerned with how the leagues negotiated the trauma of the First World War and how they contributed to the societal and military preparation for a second global conflict as the clouds of war gathered in the 1930s.

The Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire

The Navy League was the largest naval lobbying organisation in both the Edwardian and interwar years and, as such, formed an important part of the political and associational culture of early-twentieth-century Britain. From its inception, the league focused on securing and preserving British naval supremacy. The Air League correspondingly represented

the most significant and influential organisation interested in the promotion of British aerial power. Among its central aims were the 'maintenance of an Air Force capable of obtaining the mastery of the air wherever it may be called upon to operate' and the 'establishment of a thriving aircraft industry'.⁵

Given their respective aims, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that both organisations were labelled as militarists, jingoists, alarmists and scaremongers. The two leagues never publicly embraced their associations with militarism and each went to great lengths to reject such epithets. The Navy League deliberately positioned itself as 'above party' as well as being a 'peace society in the truest sense of the word', yet it undoubtedly had militaristic overtones.⁶ Such accusations were also levelled at the league's leadership, with Noel-Baker criticising Lord Lloyd, Navy League president from 1930 to 1941, for supposedly believing 'war to be inevitable and nationalist militarism to be a right and wise policy'.⁷ The Air League, which also claimed to be non-party and non-partisan, was similarly accused of being militaristic and of promoting 'MURDER, HATRED and ill will' through its propaganda.⁸ Others stated that they would not subscribe to the league because 'Flying has a base and bloody history . . . waging its battles chiefly against old men, women, and children' and wished that 'all Flying Men and Flying Machines could be abolished by the League of Nations'.⁹ In response to such statements, the league stressed that it was 'not militaristic but realistic in its outlook'.¹⁰ Stephen Marples, the Air League's first secretary, argued that the league was not 'an association of scaremongers' and was not characterised by 'sensationalism'; however this did little to fend off such accusations.¹¹ Indeed, the league and its leading figures admitted that it was 'hard to live down these labels' and frequently felt the need to insist that it was not 'bellicose or aggressive'.¹² This was especially so after an episode in 1924 in which a 'representative of a Labour and Socialist organ . . . burst into the office declaring that the Air League was heading straight for war'.¹³ Even in the late 1970s, Noel-Baker still considered the two leagues to be little more than 'militarist saboteurs'.¹⁴ In light of such accusations – and given the aims, activities and propaganda of each league – the term 'organised militarism' is used in preference to 'organised patriotism' throughout this book, even if each league would have undoubtedly favoured the latter.¹⁵

Despite concerns surrounding their militaristic nature, each organisation was supported by key figures from the social, political and military elite. Both were underpinned by a broad and eclectic network of Conservative politicians, parliamentary backbenchers, leading figures in the Admiralty and Air Ministry, military theorists, armament manufacturers, ex-servicemen,

members of the popular press and emerging fascist and pro-German organisations. Far from being marginalised for their links to the extreme right, both the Navy and Air Leagues were at times supported by prime ministers, the most senior members of the service departments and by members of the royal family. This support, combined with a resolute programme of popular education and political lobbying, meant that the two leagues were able to carry out their activities on a local, national and imperial scale.

The Navy League emerged in December 1894 following a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on British sea power written by Spenser Wilkinson, the newspaper's military correspondent.¹⁶ At the league's first meeting in January 1895 – in part organised by Wilkinson and chaired by Henry Cust, Unionist MP and editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* – the league's aims, objectives and constitution were defined.¹⁷ At the meeting, the league's purpose of securing 'as the primary object of the national policy "the Command of the Sea"' was established. Also determined was the league's aim of disseminating 'information showing the vital importance to the British Empire of the naval supremacy upon which depend its trade, empire & national existence'.¹⁸ The first page of the first issue of *The Navy League Journal* – the league's official organ until replaced by *The Navy* in 1909 – expressed these objectives in even starker terms, warning that 'by the Navy we stand or fall: if that is weak, there is unspeakable trial of war before us, war in which we must be worsted and trampled upon by our conquerors'.¹⁹

While the Navy League initially experienced financial difficulty and internal divisions, it boasted nearly 125,000 members in more than 150 branches by the outbreak of the First World War.²⁰ To promote its message, the league organised lectures, public gatherings and speaking tours; it lobbied politicians, produced pamphlets, leaflets and other forms of propaganda; and it published its own journal. It wrote widely in local and national newspapers and celebrated the nation's naval heritage through the annual commemoration of Trafalgar Day. Ideologically, the league promoted a form of 'navalism' that went far beyond understanding the navy solely in strategic terms of national defence. The league's conception of navalism was not simply concerned with large navies, high levels of naval armaments or an escalating maritime arms race, but was instead both a political and ideological movement, 'based on a conception of naval power not simply as a legitimate arm of national defence but as the basis of national might and prestige'.²¹ The Navy League remained the most significant and influential navalist lobbying organisation following the First World War, although existing accounts are almost entirely confined to the pre-war period.²²

Founded in January 1909 as the ‘Aerial League of the British Empire’, the Air League focused on the political promotion of British aerial power.²³ Echoing the Navy League, the stated aim of the Air League upon its formation was ‘to disseminate knowledge and spread information showing the vital importance to the British Empire of aerial supremacy, upon which its commerce, communications, defence and its very existence must largely depend’.²⁴ The Air League was formed by Stephen Marples – an engineer and the league’s first secretary – and Colonel H.S. Massy, ex-Bengal Lancer and the league’s first president. Its early Executive Committee comprised numerous ex-servicemen and serving officers.²⁵ Unlike the Navy League, the Air League initially had no official organ with which to disseminate its own information and so relied on local and national newspapers alongside leading aviation journals to report upon its work. Much of the Air League’s early activities focused on lobbying the political and military elite, although it was keen to celebrate the individual feats of aviators and was also concerned with education and youth. Like the Navy League’s promotion of navalism, the Air League propounded a form of ‘airmindedness’ that was political, ideological and cultural in nature and that projected images of aerial might and prestige. While the Air League was reluctant to publish membership figures, it seemingly never exceeded 8,000 members (not including 4,500 junior subscribers or 20,000 Air Defence Cadet Corps (ADCC) members in the late 1930s).²⁶ As in the case of the Navy League, sustained scholarly interest in the Air League does not extend beyond the First World War.²⁷

Understanding militarism

Before examining the nature and extent of militarism in interwar Britain, some reflection on the methodological and theoretical issues surrounding the term is required. This is especially so as militarism is an elusive, vague and contested concept, with no fixed definition.²⁸ As Matthew Johnson observes, militarism is often misunderstood, used polemically as a term of abuse or simplistically conflated with concepts such as fascism or imperialism.²⁹ Michael Howard similarly warned that militarism ‘has become a term of such general illiterate abuse that the scholar must use it with care’.³⁰ While this book does not seek to offer any new definitional framework, an examination of the concept is essential if we are to understand the various forms of militarism that existed, and at times flourished, after 1918.

Militarism is traditionally understood as militancy – or aggressive foreign policy – on the part of the state, a preponderance of the military in

the state and, finally, as a problem of civil–military relations. As Johnson notes, militarism as an institutional or ‘constitutional’ problem may refer to the ‘excessive or disproportionate political influence of a military caste within societies nominally under civilian leadership, or to the freedom of the armed forces to act independently of civilian political oversight and control’.³¹ Alfred Vagts, in his influential and wide-ranging history of militarism, conceived of certain aspects of militarism in such terms. For Vagts, militarism represented ‘a domination of the military man over the civilian, an undue preponderance of military demands, an emphasis on military considerations, spirit, ideals and scales of value, in the life of states’.³² From the late nineteenth century, militarism was also traditionally regarded as a Prussian or ‘foreign’ problem, with numerous scholars noting that militarism in Britain was ‘reduced to a minimum’ or less ‘absolute’ than in Germany.³³ The strength of existing political and parliamentary institutions, as well as social attitudes, ideas and values – consolidated by a peaceable national character – meant that where militarism existed in Britain, it supposedly did so in a muted form or as an aberration.³⁴

The political role of the military in society is a persistent theme within scholarly literature on militarism. Yet, defining militarism simply in institutional terms neglects many of its broader social, cultural and ideological aspects. Stig Förster’s definition of militarism seemingly occurs along similar lines. For Förster, ‘militarism means the purposeful appropriation of the armed forces for internal politics and/or foreign aggression, along with an over-emphasis on military policy compared to other areas of politics’.³⁵ However, as Förster stresses, a deeper appreciation of the socio-cultural elements of militarism is required. Employing a broad conception of militarism ‘allows for a broad spectrum of manifestations to be grasped. This is especially relevant to the fact that the phenomenon of militarism is in no sense confined to the military sphere’.³⁶ Others, such as Nicholas Stargardt, have similarly demonstrated that militarism is not merely about institutions and power, but also about ideas, culture and society.³⁷ Such distinctions, and necessarily broad definitions of militarism, are significant and particularly pertinent to the British case as this book illustrates. Given such terminological variations, however, it is difficult to offer any general definition of militarism or to even speak of militarism as a singular phenomenon. Moreover, militarism was appropriated in a number of ways by different states and societies and by different organisations and associational groups. As John Gillis argues, ‘judging one’s own society against this “other”, even if it is an ideal type, begs the question of whether militarism itself might mean different things in different societies’.³⁸

Complicating the picture further, scholars have distinguished between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ forms of militarism. As Laurence Cole outlines, ‘official’ militarism includes ‘foreign policy, the state’s policy towards its armed forces, army politics, preparation for war, and financial and practical support for a public “military culture”’. ‘Popular’ militarism, on the other hand, has two principal attributes. In institutional terms, Cole argues that popular militarism is independent of the state ‘even if it may cooperate with organs of the state, receive official backing from government, and include employees of state institutions among its proponents (albeit acting in a private capacity as citizens)’. The second feature of ‘popular’ militarism ‘implies the spontaneous and active participation of broad sections of the population – not just of the social elites and bourgeoisie – in activities which support the armed forces or help to cultivate a “military culture” in society at large’.³⁹ For Cole, the exploration of militarism in terms of its social and cultural manifestations has led to the increasing relevance of ‘military culture’ as a concept. As in the case of militarism, however, military culture is often framed in rather narrow terms. Isabel V. Hull, for instance, uses the term to assess ‘why an army acts as it does in war’.⁴⁰ Yet, such an approach neglects the important, and in many ways more interesting, interaction between civil and military spheres outside of conflict. As Vagts argued, ‘generally speaking, militarism flourishes more in peacetime than in war’.⁴¹ Accordingly, Cole employs a broader approach to military culture to incorporate the meaning and impact of military symbols, ideas and behaviours in society as a whole.⁴² In doing so, Cole is particularly interested in ‘patriotic activities in the public sphere that revolved around the military’ as well as military veterans’ associations.⁴³ This book is similarly interested in military culture and popular forms of militarism – as outlined by Cole – in interwar Britain.

Alongside militarism and military culture, militarisation is an equally contentious term with multiple meanings. For Cole, the militarisation of society can be understood as ‘the increased deployment of material and financial resources towards military activity, the greater involvement of social actors in military institutions, and the growing visibility and prominence of the military in cultural terms’.⁴⁴ Johnson expands this definition and outlines two distinct forms of militarisation. First:

where the subordination of society to military needs takes the form of an acceptance of military claims on economic or material resources, and where the energies of the state are channelled accordingly into military priorities such as armaments production rather than being exerted in other social or civilian directions, we might talk of the *militarization of the state*.

Second:

where, on the other hand, we are dealing with military attempts to harness not merely the economic or industrial resources of a society but the civilian population itself – that is to say, where the state endeavours to ‘make a soldier out of each civilian’, where the nation is conceived as the ‘quiescent army’, and where the problem concerns nothing less than the transformation of civilian society – it is more helpful and accurate to talk of the *militarization of society*.⁴⁵

Crucially, Johnson notes that while in practice these two forms of militarisation often overlap, this is not always the case. Those interested in the promotion of the military through the militarisation of the state may view ‘the militarization of civilian society, and the creation of a mass army, as an effective means to this end’. Contrastingly, they might instead regard a small, professionalised army – or a powerful navy or air force – ‘in which mass direct popular participation is less feasible’ as the ‘basis of military power, in which case the militarization of civilian society might be unnecessary, or even counterproductive’.⁴⁶ Certainly, this resonates with the Navy and Air League’s promotion of modern, technological and liberal forms of militarism in the interwar period and with the broader development of Britain as a ‘warfare state’.⁴⁷

As David Edgerton outlines, liberal militarism represented Britain’s reliance on military science, technology and industry – rather than Prussian-style conscription – as the basis of its military strength.⁴⁸ In a sense, the two leagues were among the most vocal exponents of the liberal militarism which developed in Britain between the wars. Neither of the leagues were mere auxiliaries for the espousal of Admiralty or Air Ministry views; in fact, at times, each league acted as the most vociferous critic of the service departments. However, as *Organised Militarism* illustrates, links of personnel, funding and shared aims meant that an almost symbiotic relationship often existed between each league and officialdom. Edgerton’s work remains the principal exception to scholarly focus on pre-1914 militarism. However, while Edgerton has demonstrated that the British state remained martial and militaristic during this period, many have since still maintained that British society was inhospitable to militarism in all its forms. This book builds upon Edgerton’s work by providing an important contribution to our understanding of voluntary associations and interwar political culture, bringing attention to an often-overlooked aspect of British society and culture during this period – namely, popular, cultural and official manifestations of militarism.

A peaceable kingdom?

The history of organised militarism in early-twentieth-century Britain is incomplete.⁴⁹ As Matthew Hendley observes in relation to the fortunes of Edwardian patriotic and imperialist organisations, there has been little attempt to establish continuity between the pre-war and post-war periods. As Hendley suggests, much of the historiography on organised patriotism has taken its chronological lead from works such as Arthur Marwick's *The Deluge*, which argues that 'most of the existing social attitudes and social structures were swept away by the war'.⁵⁰ Contrastingly, Hendley asserts that the First World War was a 'crucible for organized patriotism but it did not destroy it'.⁵¹ While patriotic and imperialist organisations such as the League of Empire and the Victoria League were able to endure the 'crucible' of war, militaristic organisations, according to Hendley, were unable to survive the conflict. Yet, Hendley only engages with one militaristic, single-purpose organisation that temporarily achieved its goal of conscription during the First World War – the National Service League.

This book highlights a number of notable and nuanced continuities between Edwardian and post-war manifestations of militarism, while also demonstrating what was distinct about the interwar period and how bodies such as the Navy and Air Leagues adapted and evolved after 1918. It argues that organised militarism did, in fact, survive the crucible of war and that the 'historiographical consensus on continuity between the pre-war and interwar periods' should be extended to include militaristic, as well as patriotic and imperialist, organisations.⁵²

The absence of scholarship on the post-war activities of the Navy and Air Leagues may, in part, be explained by the strength of liberal internationalist, pacifist and anti-war sentiment during this period, alongside an increasingly peaceable national character. This has led to the construction of a narrative which argues that the post-war evolution of associational bodies rested on an ability to embrace a non-partisan, non-sectarian and domestically orientated agenda, free from militaristic discourse.⁵³ The presence, and relative success, of groups such as the LNU, the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), the No More War Movement and the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) appears indicative of such a narrative. Yet, the LNU, the largest liberal internationalist body of the period, was not pacifist or opposed to rearmament as one might expect.⁵⁴ As Helen McCarthy notes, the union was firmly 'pacifist' in orientation, was willing to countenance military intervention to maintain the rule of international law and even accommodated 'certain elements of the popular culture of militarism'.⁵⁵ Moreover, as Waqar Zaidi reveals, there was enthusiasm from liberal

internationalists for aviation – and bombing in particular – despite fears surrounding the shadow of the bomber and a ‘knock-out’ blow from the air.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding the pacifist nature of groups such as the LNU, there was certainly a very palpable anti-war sentiment in the period. This was evidenced by the ‘King and Country’ debate at the Oxford Union in February 1933, the East Fulham by-election in October of the same year, alongside numerous anti-war publications, demonstrations and parades that had the purpose of awakening the British public to the ‘evils of war’.⁵⁷ More broadly, there were concerns about the psychological trauma of the First World War and fears that society had been brutalised by the conflict.⁵⁸

The Peace Ballot of 1934 to 1935 – an LNU initiative in which almost 12 million adults voted on questions relating to the League of Nations and collective security – seemingly represented the most obvious repudiation of militarism in interwar Britain. A significant majority voted in favour of continued league membership, disarmament, the abolition of the private manufacture of armaments alongside the use of economic and non-military sanctions in response to military aggression. A smaller majority voted in support of the collective use of military force to ensure international peace.⁵⁹ As close to 7 million people were willing to approve the use of force to preserve peace, the ballot has been interpreted in a number of ways. For Noel-Baker, it ‘proved beyond a doubt that the British people understood the policy of world disarmament and the collective security of the league’. Lord Robert Cecil, the LNU’s president, agreed, stating that Britons had shown ‘overwhelming approval’ of collective security.⁶⁰ Contrastingly, the LNU’s refusal to denounce the international use of force led Winston Churchill to note that the ballot ‘combined the contradictory propositions of reduction of armaments and forcible resistance to aggression’, while Lord Beaverbrook, proprietor of the *Daily Express*, described it as the ‘ballot of blood’.⁶¹ Historians have likewise offered several different readings. Martin Ceadel argues that it signalled the strength of public feeling behind collective security, only if understood as a ‘middle way between isolationism and militarism’.⁶² Edgerton similarly states that it is ‘often misleadingly treated as an endorsement of pacifism’, while the idea that the ballot showed that public opinion was pacifist has been dismissed by Donald Birn as ‘one of the great myths’ of the 1930s.⁶³

Despite the ambiguous nature of the Peace Ballot, there was nevertheless a supposedly widespread public and intellectual disdain for military ritual, ceremony and theatre. As Jan Rüger argues, this is perhaps best encapsulated by Ford Madox Ford’s 1925 novel *No More Parades* – part

of Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy – which denounced the pomp and pageantry of pre-First-World-War military ceremony.⁶⁴ Caroline Playne advanced similar arguments in her 1928 account of the 'pre-war mind' in Britain. She observed that, while militarism existed in Britain, it was less natural in comparison to other European societies:

The Briton has little of the sense of the glory of fight and conquest, of the pure, simple military spirit . . . Neither does the Briton care for the order and method of Militarism, the fashion and show of Militarism, which appeal to the German. He has no need for conscious display of power, no conception of collective ordering of might.⁶⁵

Yet, military theatre was an important part of the popular civic ritual of interwar Britain. The Royal Air Force (RAF) Display at Hendon, Empire Air Day, the Army's Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo, the Royal Tournament at Olympia, Navy Weeks and fleet reviews were attended by millions of spectators and allowed the services to promote their respective strengths. All were conscious, choreographed displays of power and military might, exhibited to domestic and foreign audiences alike.⁶⁶ So popular were such events that commentators wondered 'what chance has the feeble propaganda of the "peace societies" against all these? Conditions are ripening for another great war, and the public mind is being prepared for it.'⁶⁷ As we shall see, many undoubtedly understood the underlying message of military theatre and were seemingly at ease with exhibitions of the 'destructive power' of both the battleship and the bomber.⁶⁸ As this book reveals, the Navy and Air Leagues played key roles in the promotion of naval and aerial power through popular forms of civic ritual and military pageantry. Through its annual commemoration of Trafalgar Day, the Navy League promoted themes of heritage, nostalgia and tradition, while the Air League showcased military might, technological innovation and modernity on Empire Air Day.

As further evidence of the existence of militarism prior to 1914, historians point to the popularity of uniformed youth organisations such as the Boys' Brigade, the Church Lads' Brigade, the Jewish Lads' Brigade and Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts.⁶⁹ However, reflecting existing studies of organised militarism, the First World War frequently marks either a point of rupture or termination for studies exploring the place of militarism within such groups. As Scott Johnston observes, the Boy Scout movement underwent a 'change in values, from militaristic manifestations of duty and service towards pacifism and internationalism . . . Something significant had changed in the British public, who now directed their youth towards internationalist organizations rather than cadet programmes.'⁷⁰

The Navy and Air Leagues devoted considerable energy to the promotion of sea- and airmindedness among the nation's youth – despite the seemingly inhospitable social, cultural and political environment of the period. The leagues attempted to disseminate their message in schools and universities, at major civic events and through their own uniformed youth movements – the Sea Cadet Corps (SCC) and the ADCC. The ethos of each corps – which largely revolved around service, discipline, patriotism and duty – linked citizenship, physical culture and a militarised masculinity among boys. Although the Navy and Air Leagues emphasised the defensive and passive elements of each corps from their inception, there is little doubt that each league hoped members would make a direct military contribution to the nation.

Despite the ideological flexibility of organisations such as the LNU, the multiplicity of meaning attached to the Peace Ballot, public desire for military spectacle and the popularity of militaristic youth organisations, militaristic leagues such as the Navy and Air Leagues have nevertheless received little scholarly attention in the post-war period. However, the leagues were linked to the two technological arms accorded the highest military and strategic priority by the state in the interwar years: the Royal Navy and the RAF. As Edgerton demonstrates, far from being a period of military decline, Britain was the 'pioneer of modern, technologically focused warfare; its naval and air forces long led the world'.⁷¹ Britain was developing as a 'warfare state'. In terms of defence expenditure and military preparedness, Britain was one of the most heavily militarised, modern states in Europe by the outbreak of the Second World War.⁷² Such technological, industrial and military capacity seems remarkable – even paradoxical – in the context of the long-established historical narrative that presents interwar Britain as a nation which had repudiated militarism, embraced disarmament and relied upon international diplomacy for the preservation of peace.

Tradition and technology

The Royal Navy was long seen as 'Britain's first' and 'only line of defence', central to the preservation of islandhood and inexorably bound to notions of nation and national identity.⁷³ Although the navy remained fundamental to Britain's development as a warfare state after the First World War, a series of post-war naval disarmament treaties, compounded by increasing fears surrounding the destructive potential of the aeroplane, seemingly made the 'security previously granted by the combination of the Royal Navy and Britain's island insularity appear irrelevant'.⁷⁴

Accordingly, scholars have described a 'weakening' and even 'collapse of British navalism' after 1918.⁷⁵ The subsequent development of 'sea blindness', according to this interpretation, was marked by a decline in public and political interest in the nation's maritime and naval affairs to the extent that such issues were 'effectively ignored'.⁷⁶

Yet, despite the supposedly 'profound cultural dislocation' of the First World War, the navy represented an important symbol of permanence, continuity and tradition.⁷⁷ As Christopher Bell states, the 'sea and the navy' continued to 'play a central role in British national mythology. The British people were disposed to view themselves as a seafaring race, with a special affinity for the sea and an unmatched aptitude for maritime pursuits.'⁷⁸ For the Navy League, 'Sea Sense' formed an 'intangible but vitally important asset of our race', with an 'ardent love of the sea' representing the 'most striking characteristic of our people'.⁷⁹ Such views were not confined to the Navy League, but were shared by politicians and decision-making elites across the political spectrum. For Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour prime minister, the 'way of Great Britain is on the sea . . . Our Navy is no mere superfluity to us. It is us.' Winston Churchill expressed similar sentiments, stating that 'Great Britain, since the most remote time, had always been supreme at sea. The life of the nation, its culture, its prosperity, had rested on that basis.'⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the advent of the aeroplane challenged notions of island-hood and insularity, meant that 'connections between the sea, insularity and national greatness' were no longer axiomatic and, for some, even heralded the end of Britain's status as an island nation.⁸¹ The Air League was among those who advanced this narrative, declaring in 1926 that the 'old bulwark of the sea has ceased to exist as a protective asset. England's insular position has gone never to return.'⁸² This loss of insularity, the experience of air raids in Britain during the First World War and the 'staggering progress of aviation' after 1918 'only served to make the next war seem ever more apocalyptic'. Military theorists, politicians, journalists, novelists and anti-war activists issued stark warnings about the ruin of civilisation, the destruction of cities and the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians that would result from 'hundreds of tonnes of high explosive, incendiary and even poison gas bombs' being unloaded from 'clouds of bombers' which would 'darken the skies over the great cities with little warning'.⁸³

There was, then, undoubtedly a 'culture of anticipation' in Britain surrounding the aeroplane.⁸⁴ However, it would be incorrect to simply 'conclude that the English were afraid of the aeroplane and that they saw it as a hideous foreign invention'.⁸⁵ Instead, there was correspondingly a widespread hope that the aeroplane could be a peaceful and

beneficial tool for ending wars, promoting trade and commerce, and as something that had the potential to bring nations closer together.⁸⁶ More broadly, while there was anxiety and insecurity regarding the destructive potential of the aeroplane, there was also excitement and enthusiasm for aviation which was cultivated through newspapers, magazines, novels and films.⁸⁷ Above all else, however, the most 'effective way to bring air-mindedness to the masses' was, as Brett Holman notes, through 'aerial theatre' – the 'use of aviation spectacle to project images of future warfare, national power and technological prowess'.⁸⁸ Air races, reviews and displays attracted hundreds of thousands of spectators annually and represented distinctly 'modern form[s] of mass entertainment for an increasingly air-minded generation'.⁸⁹

The Navy League was by no means anti-modern or anachronistic, frequently extolling the power and technological might of the Royal Navy. It also stressed that as the 'oldest and best known organisation concerned with the needs of National defence' it was 'the first to recognise the absolutely vital needs of air supremacy'.⁹⁰ The Air League, meanwhile, was deeply conscious of the nation's naval heritage and tradition, urging that it 'must not be counted among those who say that navies are now obsolete'.⁹¹ Nonetheless, strategic, societal and cultural tensions between heritage and tradition on the one hand, and modernity and technological innovation on the other, were in many respects reflected in the aims, activities and propagandistic work of the Navy and Air Leagues. The Navy League underlined the navy's long-standing centrality to islandhood and insularity, national security, trade and commerce and the maintenance of Britain's empire. Conversely, as aviation was a relatively new and rapidly developing form of technology, the Air League had little tradition to draw upon and so emphasised innovation, progress, excitement and the transformative nature of flight, for the most part 'celebrating present and potential technological progress much more than past achievements'.⁹² In spite of their different approaches, both leagues could be said to have held 'conservative notion[s] of modernity predicated on a desire for continuity', with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force representing tools through which to preserve an international status quo in which Britain played a leading role.⁹³

Sources and structure

In examining the place of organised militarism in the interwar period, this book uses a diverse and largely unused range of sources. Alongside the

minute books, annual reports and memoranda of the two leagues, *Organised Militarism* utilises the private papers, diaries, letters and memoirs of a range of key figures connected with each organisation. Unfortunately, the papers of many leading figures seemingly no longer exist. However, the correspondence and files of several presidents, chairmen and secretary generals remain, revealing much about the internal debates, organisation and development of both leagues.⁹⁴ In detailing the relationship between each league and the service departments, the study also makes use of Admiralty sources and Air Ministry records. Beyond the institutional level, this book also analyses a range of other material, visual and documentary ephemera. This includes parliamentary proceedings, official souvenir programmes, posters, pamphlets, leaflets, local and national newspapers, military journals, oral-testimony collections, newsreels, photographs and satirical cartoons. Situating the activities of the Navy and Air Leagues within the wider landscape of interwar associational culture and voluntarism is crucial for providing a sense of the scale and significance of the two organisations. Accordingly, this book examines the papers and publications of a range of other associations in relation to the activities of the two leagues, including naval and aviation societies, liberal internationalist, pacifist and anti-war groups, as well as fascist and pro-German organisations.

In examining the influence and activities of the two leagues, this book is organised thematically. It starts with an institutional overview of the leagues, providing an account of their aims, work and leadership, before detailing finances and funding sources. It explores the extensive links between both leagues and the service departments, alongside connections between each organisation and the far right. It looks at women's league-related activism, as well as the philanthropic and charitable activities of both organisations. As [Chapter 1](#) demonstrates, the Navy and Air Leagues operated at the intersection between 'high' and 'low' politics and, although they were not mass-membership organisations, they were extremely well connected, with allies in the social, political and military elite.⁹⁵

After tracing the structural contours of each league, the book then considers how the leagues negotiated questions emerging from the First World War surrounding disarmament, collective security, internationalism and anti-war sentiment. [Chapter 2](#) reveals that, far from being immune to such issues, both the Navy and Air Leagues briefly supported policies in favour of arms limitation or collective security, resulting in a series of high-profile resignations. Such policies were short lived, and it was not long before each league was once again promoting naval and aerial power.

Chapter 3 examines the political promotion of naval and aerial rearmament and the extent to which both organisations contributed to the military preparedness of Britain prior to the Second World War. While the agitation for naval and aerial armaments was at the core of each league's ethos, by the mid-to-late 1930s, neither league was an unrelenting detractor of the state and neither called for a programme of unrestricted armaments. Each league was certainly critical of the state and service departments when necessary, but the increasingly symbiotic relationship between the leagues and the Admiralty and Air Ministry meant that propaganda for greater armaments was of a measured and restrained nature. Finally, the chapter uncovers the numerous links that existed between both leagues and the private manufacturers of armaments, otherwise known as the 'merchants of death'. These links attracted much criticism and did little to distance either league from accusations of militarism.

Building upon the book's previous focus on political, institutional and official expressions of militarism, Chapter 4 looks at how both leagues attempted to maintain links between the Royal Navy, the RAF and notions of nation, empire and national and imperial identity. For the Navy and Air Leagues, sea and air power were central to the preservation of nation, particularly in relation to ideas of insularity and islandhood. Both leagues similarly championed the Royal Navy and the RAF as tools for cultivating imperial unity and as a means through which to forge and maintain links with the predominantly white, self-governing dominions. Conversely, each league also pointed to the ways in which the Royal Navy and the RAF could be used to reinforce control over the 'non-white portions of the empire' – primarily through gunboat diplomacy and aerial bombardment.⁹⁶

Chapter 5 examines the educational efforts of both leagues and the creation of their own respective militaristic youth organisations: the SCC and ADCC. Although the youth of Britain had supposedly rejected war, popular and cultural forms of navalism and air-mindedness particular appealed to British youth, while many willingly embraced ideas of patriotism, duty and service. Chapters 6 and 7 explore – through Trafalgar Day and Empire Air Day – cultural and symbolic representations of the navy and air force in the popular civic ritual of interwar Britain. Positioning itself within recent socio-cultural interest in the navy and aviation, the book argues that despite hostility towards the pomp and pageantry of pre-First World War military ceremony, events such as Trafalgar Day and Empire Air Day – and naval commemoration and aerial theatre more broadly – enjoyed significant resonance.⁹⁷ As Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate, military theatre was a politically and culturally acceptable way of

promoting rearmament, popular militarism and, particularly in the case of Empire Air Day, the military capabilities of the British state to domestic and global audiences.

The conclusion reflects on the work of the Navy and Air Leagues throughout the interwar years. It assesses their legacy and the extent to which each organisation achieved their respective goals of ensuring British naval and aerial supremacy. It emphasises that while neither organisation was able to attain large membership numbers, this by no means heralded the end of organised militarism. The book concludes by considering the place of organised militarism at the outbreak of the Second World War and how the Navy and Air Leagues contributed to the national war effort throughout the conflict.

Organised Militarism offers the most complete account of the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire to date and shines new light upon the broader political and associational culture of the interwar period. The book argues that an examination of the Navy and Air Leagues provides crucial insights into key issues of the period including militarism and modernity, nation and empire, technology and tradition, youth and education, war and peace. It demonstrates that martial and militaristic sentiment remained an important part of mainstream British political culture, despite the ravages of war. Although there were calls for 'no more parades' in the interwar period, and while Britain had supposedly become a 'peaceable kingdom', militarism existed in institutional, ideological, cultural and popular forms. While patriotic and imperialist leagues remained 'active forces' in Britain following the First World War, the same is true of militaristic organisations as the following account of the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire reveals.⁹⁸

Notes

1. Philip Noel-Baker, *The Private Manufacture of Armaments: Volume I* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1936), 290–91.
2. Noel-Baker, *Private Manufacture of Armaments*, 293. Although Noel-Baker was concerned that such sentiments were ‘marginally libellous’ and left him ‘open to attack’, he felt his account was ‘true’ and ‘very important’. Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Cambridge, the Papers of Baron Noel-Baker (Noel-Baker Papers), GBR/0014/NBKR 7/14/2, Correspondence, Letter from Philip Noel-Baker to Lord Robert Cecil, 23 July 1936.
3. Anne Summers, ‘Militarism in Britain Before the Great War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 2 (1976): 121; Matthew C. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism and the Crucible of War: Popular Imperialism in Britain, 1914–1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 64; Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 268.
4. Jon Lawrence, ‘Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003): 588.
5. *Air League Bulletin*, December 1923, 8.
6. National Maritime Museum (NMM), Greenwich, London, Arnold White Papers (White Papers), WHI/142, Arnold White, The Navy League and the Public, 1914, 10.
7. CAC, Noel-Baker Papers, GBR/0014/NBKR 7/16/2, Letter from Noel-Baker to Lord David Davies, 2 December 1936.
8. *Air Review*, May 1936, 11. Emphasis in original.
9. *Air League Bulletin*, November 1921, 165.
10. *Air Review*, October 1934, 14.
11. *Flight*, 10 April 1909, 204.
12. Royal Air Force Museum (RAF Museum), London, Lord Brabazon of Tara Papers (Brabazon Papers), AC 71/3, Box 75, 22; Letter from J.A. Chamier to J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon, 3 January 1935, 1; *Air League Bulletin*, February 1924, 11. I am grateful to Sophy Antrobus for bringing the Moore-Brabazon collection to my attention.
13. *Air League Bulletin*, February 1924, 11.
14. Philip Noel-Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference 1932–1933 and Why It Failed* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), 60–61.
15. ‘Organised patriotism’ is used by Matthew Hendley to describe patriotic and imperialist organisations such as the National Service League, the League of the Empire and Victoria League. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*. For a recent discussion of Edwardian patriotic leagues and the Conservative Right, see Chapter 1 of N.C. Fleming, *Britannia’s Zealots, Volume I: Tradition, Empire and the Forging of the Conservative Right* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).
16. Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16.
17. N.C. Fleming, ‘The Imperial Maritime League: British Navalism, Conflict, and the Radical Right, c.1907–1920’, *War in History*, 23 (2016): 301.
18. NMM, MSY/6/3/3/1, Navy League Minute Book 1894–1895 (NL Minute Book), Meeting held on 10 January 1895, 2–3.
19. *The Navy League Journal*, July 1895, 1.
20. Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 69.

21. Dirk Bönker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States Before World War I* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1; Johnson, *Militarism*, 69. For a discussion of different forms of pre-war navalism, see Bradley Cesario, *New Crusade: The Royal Navy and British Navalism, 1884–1914* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), viii–x.
22. The principal exception is Duncan Redford, ‘Collective Security and Internal Dissent: The Navy League’s Attempts to Develop a New Policy towards British Naval Power Between 1919 and the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty’, *History*, 96 (2011): 48–67, although this only examines the Navy League up until 1922.
23. The ‘Aerial League of the British Empire’ became the ‘Air League of the British Empire’ following a resolution passed on 26 March 1920. The Air League (AL), London, Air League Minute Book (AL Minute Book), Extraordinary General Meeting, 26 March 1920, 1. For consistency, the Air League will be used throughout, even when referring to the Aerial League.
24. The National Archives (TNA), Kew, T 1/11059, Aerial League of the British Empire, Copy of Memorandum and Articles of Association, 1909, 1.
25. AL, AL Minute Book, Meeting of the Executive Committee (MEC), 3 May 1909, 2; 4; National Aerospace Library, Royal Aeronautical Society (NAL), Farnborough, ENV16C, Aerial League of the British Empire, ENV16A, Council and Executive Committee, 2.
26. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 7 April 1936, 2; *The Times*, 6 December 1939, 6.
27. Uri Bialer, ‘Elite Opinion and Defence Policy: Air Power Advocacy and British Rearmament during the 1930s’, *British Journal of International Studies*, 6 (1980): 32–51 provides an exception.
28. Even in his extensive study, Volker R. Berghahn noted that there was no scholarly consensus or ‘agreed theory’ of militarism. Volker R. Berghahn, *Militarism: The History of an International Debate 1861–1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 ed.), 123.
29. Johnson, *Militarism*, 4.
30. Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 109.
31. Johnson, *Militarism*, 5.
32. Although Vagts also outlined the ideological elements of militarism such as ‘the qualities of caste and cult, authority and belief’: Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism: Civilian and Military* (London: Meridian Books, 1959 ed.), 13–14.
33. Johnson, *Militarism*, 10–11; 13.
34. Lawrence, ‘Peaceable Kingdom’.
35. Cited in Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.
36. Cole, *Military Culture*, 13.
37. Nicholas Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.
38. John R. Gillis, ed., *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 2.
39. Cole, *Military Culture*, 13.
40. Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 93.
41. Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 15.
42. Cole, *Military Culture*, 16.

43. Cole, *Military Culture*, 17.
44. Cole, *Military Culture*, 13.
45. Johnson, *Militarism*, 6. Emphasis in original.
46. Johnson, *Militarism*, 6–7.
47. David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54.
48. David Edgerton, ‘Liberal Militarism and the British State’, *New Left Review*, 185 (1991): 138–69.
49. As Matthew Hendley notes with regards to organised patriotism and imperialism. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 3.
50. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 3–4; Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965).
51. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 4.
52. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 4.
53. Helen McCarthy, ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (2007): 892; Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 6.
54. Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 3; Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 54.
55. McCarthy, *The British People*, 3; 137. First coined by A.J.P. Taylor. See A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 51. Martin Ceadel distinguishes between ‘pacifism’, the ‘belief that all war is *always wrong* and should never be resorted to’, and ‘pacificism’, the ‘assumption that war, though *sometimes necessary*, is always an irrational and inhumane way to solve disputes, and that its prevention should always be an overriding political priority’. Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914–1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3. Emphasis in original.
56. See Chapters 2 and 3 of Waqar H. Zaidi, *Technological Internationalism and World Order: Aviation, Atomic Energy, and the Search for International Peace, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
57. For the Oxford Union debate, see Martin Ceadel, ‘The “King and Country” Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators’, *The Historical Journal*, 22 (1979): 397–422. For the East Fulham by-election, see Martin Ceadel, ‘Interpreting East Fulham’, in *By-Elections in British Politics*, ed. Chris Cook and John Ramsden (London: Macmillan, 1973), 94–111. David C. Lukowitz, ‘British Pacifists and Appeasement: The Peace Pledge Union’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9 (1974): 115.
58. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Lawrence, ‘Peaceable Kingdom’.
59. Helen McCarthy, ‘Democratizing British Foreign Policy: Rethinking the Peace Ballot, 1934–1935’, *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010): 358.
60. Noel-Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference*, 141; J.A. Thompson, ‘The Peace Ballot and the Public’, *Albion*, 13 (1981): 381.
61. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume One: The Gathering Storm* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1950 ed.), 152; Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 538.
62. Martin Ceadel, ‘The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934–5’, *The English Historical Review*, 95 (1980): 838.

63. Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 54; Donald S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union 1918–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 143.
64. Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 260–61.
65. Caroline E. Playne, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain: An Historical Review* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 125.
66. A point made in relation to naval theatre by Jan Rüger, but which can be traced through military theatre and pageantry more broadly. Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*.
67. J.M. Kenworthy, *Will Civilisation Crash?* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1927), 196.
68. Rowan Thompson, ‘No More Parades? Navy Weeks, Naval Theatre and Navalism, 1927–38’, *Historical Research*, 96 (2023): 241–2; Brett Holman, ‘The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre: Air Displays and Airmindedness in Britain and Australia Between the World Wars’, *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019): 500.
69. See John O. Springhall, ‘The Boy Scouts, Class and Militarism in Relation to Youth Movements 1908–1930’, *International Review of Social History*, 16 (1971): 125–58; John Springhall, ‘Baden-Powell and the Scout Movement Before 1920: Citizen Training or Soldiers of the Future?’, *The English Historical Review*, 102 (1987): 934–42; John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883–1940* (London: Croom Helm, 1977); Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); Richard A. Voeltz, ‘“... A Good Jew and a Good Englishman”: The Jewish Lads’ Brigade, 1894–1922’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (1988): 119–27; and Summers, ‘Militarism in Britain’. Martin Dedman, Allen Warren and Sam Pryke have contrastingly argued that the militarism of groups such as the Boy Scouts has been exaggerated: Martin Dedman, ‘Baden-Powell, Militarism, and the “Invisible Contributors” to the Boy Scout Scheme, 1904–1920’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 4 (1993): 201–23; Allen Warren, ‘Sir Robert Baden-Powell, the Scout Movement and Citizen Training in Great Britain, 1900–1920’, *The English Historical Review*, 101 (1986): 376–98; Sam Pryke, ‘The Popularity of Nationalism in the Early British Boy Scout Movement’, *Social History*, 23 (1998): 309–24.
70. Scott Johnston, ‘Courting Public Favour: The Boy Scout Movement and the Accident of Internationalism, 1907–29’, *Historical Research*, 88 (2015): 508.
71. Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 1.
72. Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 58.
73. Duncan Redford, ‘The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness and British National Identity’, in *Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World*, ed. Duncan Redford (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 61.
74. Redford, *The Royal Navy*, 70–71.
75. Richard Harding, *Modern Naval History: Debates and Prospects* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 128; Redford, ‘Collective Security’, 48.
76. Duncan Redford, ‘Introduction’, in *Maritime History*, ed. Redford, 6. For a challenge to this narrative in relation to historical pageantry, see Rowan Thompson, ‘Naval Pageantry, Heritage, and Commemoration in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 68 (2025): 376–96.
77. Eleanor K. O’Keeffe, ‘The Great War and “Military Memory”: War and Remembrance in the Civic Public Sphere, 1919–1939’, *Journalism Studies*, 17 (2016): 443.
78. Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 180.
79. *The Navy*, June 1931, 155.

80. Bell, *The Royal Navy*, xv.
81. Paul Readman, "'The Cliffs Are Not Cliffs': The Cliffs of Dover and National Identities in Britain, c.1750–c.1950', *History*, 49 (2014): 242; 249. For a discussion of this in relation to naval theatre, see Thompson, 'No More Parades', 227.
82. *Air League Bulletin*, February 1926, 7.
83. Brett Holman, 'Spectre and Spectacle: Mock Air Raids as Aerial Theatre in Interwar Britain', in *Aviation in the Literature and Culture of Interwar Britain* *Aviation*, ed. Michael McCluskey and Luke Seaber (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 228.
84. Roxanne Panchasi, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France Between the Wars* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2009).
85. David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2013 ed.), 70.
86. Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre', 483–4.
87. A feature of British experiences of modernity in this period as shown in Rieger, *Technology*.
88. Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre', 483.
89. Holman, 'Spectre and Spectacle', 229.
90. CAC, The Papers of Lord Lloyd of Dolobran (Lloyd Papers), GBR/0014/GLLD 22/16, Lecture to the Glasgow Branch of the Navy League, 1 April 1936, 1.
91. *Air Review*, September 1936, 13.
92. As in the case of aerial theatre, Brett Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon: The Royal Air Force Display, Aerial Theatre and the Technological Sublime, 1920–37', *Historical Research*, 93 (2020): 139.
93. Rieger, *Technology*, 274.
94. This is not the case in all instances. For example, the papers of Lord Mottistone – Air League president in the early 1920s and chairman for much of the 1930s – and Lord Montagu – one of the league's founders and president 1917–20 – contain little on their respective tenures. Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Papers of John Edward Bernard Seely, Lord Mottistone (Mottistone Papers); Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), London, Douglas-Scott-Montagu, Brig. Gen. John Walter Edward, 2nd Baron (GB0099 KCLMA Douglas-Scott-Montagu).
95. Much like pre-war patriotic organisations. Coetzee, *For Party or Country*, 6.
96. A feature of naval theatre in this period John C. Mitcham, 'The 1924 Empire Cruise and the Imagining of an Imperial Community', *Britain and the World*, 12 (2019): 69.
97. Recent examples include Quintin Colville and James Davey, eds, *A New Naval History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) and McCluskey and Seaber, eds, *Aviation*.
98. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 228.

Chapter 1

The Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire

Closely after the armistice of November 1918, the Navy League reflected that it could ‘find no words in which to express adequately its whole hearted sense of gratitude to the entire personnel of the Fleet’ for their ‘magnificent and unparalleled spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice’ during the recently concluded conflict. While the league admitted that the ‘decisive battle’ which the Royal Navy hoped for had not materialised, its victory was ‘none the less glorious in that it has been achieved, not in storm and smoke, but in the lowering of the German Ensign for all time upon the seas’. ‘It is’, the league concluded, ‘to the British Fleet we owe to-day the safety of our shores and the freedom of mankind’.¹

In the first edition of its journal, *The Aerial League Bulletin*, the Air League contrastingly reflected on the role of Britain’s air force in the conflict: ‘We went into this war with less than a hundred aeroplanes. We have got through, but it took us more than four years to do it at a colossal cost in lives and treasure.’ While the league hoped that ‘there will be no more war: we are not sufficiently sanguine to expect it. And the next war may be a matter of a few days and of a surprise attack by an enormous number of bomb-dropping aeroplanes.’ Accordingly, the league asserted that:

The more we look at the future, the more we see the urgent necessity for the work of the League . . . So fine is the objective that we have in view – the supremacy of the British Empire in the air both in commerce and in war – that we believe every patriotic man and woman should make an effort to join us. We did not do all that we might have done for National Defence before the war, and for years we have paid the penalty. It must never happen again.²

Calls for continuing naval and aerial supremacy, so soon after the signing of the armistice, appear at odds with suggestions that ‘British distaste for militarism and patriotic excess was unmistakeable after 1918’ and that ‘[m]ilitaristic values were unacceptable’ in the post-war world. However, the ‘First World War did not sweep away all the previous signposts of traditional patriotism’ and calls for military supremacy remained remarkably persistent.³ The ongoing work of the Navy and Air Leagues provides a case in point.

The Navy League and the command of the sea

Neither league was a post-war creation; they were instead part of the broad proliferation of patriotic, imperialist and militaristic organisations that emerged in the decades prior to the First World War. Described as an ‘associational epoch’ and the ‘league age’ by contemporaries and historians since, patriotic and militaristic organisations formed a prominent part of the political landscape of Edwardian Britain.⁴ The Navy League was among the most influential of such organisations, representing the ‘most prominent exponents of navalism in Britain’ both before and after the First World War.⁵

Emerging in 1894 in the aftermath of a naval scare initially propagated by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, before being advanced by other national newspapers, the Navy League’s primary *raison d’être* was the political promotion of British naval power.⁶ As stated in *The Navy League Journal*, the league wished to:

strengthen that England which has made us what we are: to retain the inheritance of greatness which our fathers bequeathed to us: to confirm that proud national position without which many of us feel that life in this smoky island would be intolerable; and to do this by making the Navy strong.⁷

To achieve this, the league established branches in ‘almost every area of the country’ as well as overseas. It issued articles in its own journal and letters in the press, produced leaflets, held public meetings and used the annual commemoration of Trafalgar Day to impress upon the British public the message that naval supremacy was essential to prevent invasion, to maintain the empire and to secure the nation’s commerce and food.⁸ In seeking to influence political circles, the league issued ‘test questions’ to political candidates during the 1895 general election to ‘elicit from them a promise to urge upon the Government the necessity for naval estimates adequate to our needs’. It maintained this practice

in subsequent elections.⁹ Moreover, the league exerted ‘considerable influence over government naval policy through its members and mobilization of public opinion’ during events including the 1909 naval estimates crisis and the January 1910 general election.¹⁰

Yet, despite its scale and success, there were conflicting views on the character and direction of Navy League propaganda. As N.C. Fleming highlights, two contending approaches to activism existed within the league. The first position, maintained by an influential minority, saw the organisation as ‘an unofficial overseer of naval policy’ that was willing to use ‘politics to exert pressure against the decision-making processes of naval professionals and ministers’. Conversely, most members were far more cautious of antagonising the Admiralty and government, instead focusing on public education.¹¹ This tension led to a schism within the league and the subsequent creation of the Imperial Maritime League (IML) in 1908. The IML held public meetings, published pamphlets, books, letters and other ephemera, launched a series of public campaigns to strengthen Britain’s naval defences and formed its own junior branch.¹² The IML was unable to gain the same prominence as the Navy League, however, while its branch and membership levels paled in comparison to those of its parent organisation. Despite this, the IML prompted a series of internal reforms and shifts in the Navy League’s propagandistic work, including an increasing willingness to criticise officialdom.¹³

The Navy League represented the ‘most significant manifestation of the New Navalism’ of the late Victorian and Edwardian era, however it also sought to ‘keep alive the spirit of the sea’ during the First World War and, indeed, beyond.¹⁴ Throughout the conflict, the league trained boys in the ‘preparation for a sea career’, organised essay prizes and educational activities in schools, continued to commemorate Trafalgar Day, published a range of literature, carried out numerous charitable and philanthropic endeavours, and held propagandistic lectures and public meetings.¹⁵

While the league celebrated the ‘lowering of the German Ensign for all time upon the seas’ and called for ‘the retention of Britain’s naval supremacy’ shortly after the armistice, it admitted in its annual report for 1919 that the year had ‘been one of some difficulty for the League in framing its immediate future policy’.¹⁶ The ‘disappearance of the German Fleet, the protracted sessions of the Peace Conference, the birth of the League of Nations, and the attitude adopted by the United States, together with the absence of any declared naval policy by the British Government’ were cited as factors in the league’s decision ‘not to commit itself to taking part in any matters controversial or political’.¹⁷ As explored in [Chapter 2](#), although short-lived, such sentiments – which by the early 1920s included the countenance of arms limitation and collective security – were far

removed from the league's long-standing promotion of naval supremacy, leading to protest among rank-and-file members, rebellion against the league's leadership and a schism which threatened the league's very existence.¹⁸

The origins of the Air League of the British Empire

By the close of the twentieth century's first decade, both the aeroplane and airship were 'developing rapidly into reliable modes of transport, and the time when they would be used both in commerce and in war was clearly not far away'. While the 'apparent potential of aviation still far outstripped its present capabilities', many foresaw the role of the aeroplane in future conflict.¹⁹ As early as 1906, after witnessing Alberto Santos-Dumont's successful flight of 722 feet in France, the newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe proclaimed that 'England is no longer an island' and warned that there 'will be no more sleeping safely behind the wooden walls of Old England with the Channel our safety moat'.²⁰ Other 'airminded prophets' recognised the transformative power of flight. Perhaps most notably, H.G. Wells's 1908 novel, *The War in the Air*, envisaged the destruction of cities by airships, global conflict and the ruin of civilisation.²¹ Amidst growing anxiety surrounding the military potential of the aeroplane, combined with the 'advanced stage of aerial progress in other countries', the Air League of the British Empire was formed in early 1909.²²

The Air League provided a counterpoint to the promotion of naval power – which lay at the heart of bodies such as the Navy League, IML and the lesser-known Society of Islanders – and calls for compulsory military training by organisations such as the National Service League. In seeking to advance the cause of air power, the Air League arranged lectures, tours and public meetings, distributed leaflets and pamphlets, wrote newspaper articles, staged plays, used film and organised various forms of aerial demonstrations. To augment these activities, the Women's Aerial League (WAL) was formed in May 1909, while a youth branch – the Young Aerial League – was created in early 1910.²³

In setting out the reasons for its formation, the league stated that:

while other nations are striving to obtain the lead in this race for the conquest of the air, Great Britain lags behind . . . While Britain is looking on idly at the great events which concern her more deeply than any other people on earth, a great industry of to-day and the future is being monopolised elsewhere, and Aerial Fleets are being

initiated which threaten her commerce, supplies, and command of the sea.

So serious was this supposed state of inertia, that the league warned it would lead to the 'extinction of all that England is, has been and stands for, and will bring this country to the level of the dead nations of the past'. 'It is', the league declared, 'to fight against this spirit, and to awaken the people of Great Britain and the Empire to the very grave danger of permitting other nations to get ahead of us in the conquest of the air, that this League has been inaugurated'.²⁴

At its public inauguration at the Mansion House, London, in April 1909, the league's message was hardly more sanguine. Addressing those gathered, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, a founding member of the League, declared:

this meeting of the citizens of London . . . regards with considerable anxiety the rapid development of the science and practice of aerial navigation by other nations, and deplores the backwardness and apathy shown by this country regarding this new means of communication, which is of vital importance from a commercial as well as from a national defence point of view.

At the meeting, Marples stressed that the league was not 'an association of scaremongers' with 'an alarmist programme', while *Flight* warned that the 'gospel of sensationalism should be shunned by the League'.²⁵ However, the meeting undoubtedly emphasised the importance of aviation to the nation's security in rather stark terms. Indeed, Montagu expressed his conviction that '[v]ery few people realised that within five years the insularity of our country might be destroyed'.²⁶ For *The Daily Telegraph*, it was clear that the 'conquest of the air has been achieved . . . the question now is not the conquest of the sky, but which nation shall secure its sovereignty . . . it behoves this country to wake up at once'.²⁷

There were few attempts by the Air League to attain a broad, cross-class membership. Instead, the league focused on securing the support of an array of eminent social, political and military figures and it was largely successful in this endeavour. Individuals including Arthur Balfour, Austen Chamberlain, Sir Edward Grey, Field Marshal Earl Roberts, Lord Curzon of Kedleston and Winston Churchill all supported the league at various points.²⁸ The league also secured the Liberal peer Lord Esher as its president in September 1909, although his tenure was far from harmonious. Several months after his appointment, Esher resigned his presidency.²⁹

The First World War curtailed the league's activities, with a variety of schemes being suspended. Despite this, it remained active in charitable and philanthropic activities, continued to provide lectures and public meetings, and produced several propaganda films.³⁰ The absence of a high-profile president following Esher's resignation remained a pressing concern. In late 1917, the league's search came to an end with the appointment of Lord Montagu.³¹ Montagu oversaw the league's restructuring and was well known throughout the political and aviation community. His tenure ended in March 1920, when J.E.B. Seely (later Lord Mottistone), former secretary of state for war and under-secretary of state for air, agreed to serve as president.³² After a year, however, Seely intimated that he could no longer fulfil his duties.³³ After some delay, the Duke of Sutherland assumed the role in March 1922, serving in this capacity until 1945.³⁴

The Navy and Air Leagues after 1918

The Navy League

The Navy League employed a variety of techniques to educate the British public on the ongoing value of seapower and to maintain popular pride in the nation's rich naval heritage. Mirroring many of its pre-war activities, the league distributed textbooks to schools, sent letters to the press, hosted public meetings and lectures, issued pamphlets, leaflets and films, circulated *The Navy*, commemorated Trafalgar Day and maintained the SCC. Despite a drop in membership numbers and branches prompted by a series of internal clashes in the early 1920s, the league had a network of local branches throughout Britain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many were concentrated in coastal, littoral regions and port towns such as Bristol, Brighton, East Kent and Canterbury, Plymouth, Southend and Bexhill. Branches were not merely confined to southern areas, but were instead present across the country including in Liverpool, Northumberland, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Cardiff. The league also had divisions in London and in industrial, urban centres including Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester. Such bodies were important for spreading popular navalism and sea-mindedness across the country. Furthermore, the league had a series of overseas branches in China, Ceylon, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa that carried out important work on its behalf.

The Navy League was in patrician, Conservative hands in the inter-war period. The league's affairs and policies were governed through its Executive Committee, which comprised influential politicians, former

and future colonial administrators, government and Admiralty officials, ex-servicemen, technocrats, military theorists and members of the popular press. While not all Navy League figures necessarily wielded extensive political influence, many maintained important networks and channels through which they advanced the league's agenda. The league had a series of influential chairmen – including Sir Cyril Cobb, who occupied the position from 1922 to 1934 – and general secretaries who, in tandem with the Executive Committee, were responsible for much of the league's general activities.³⁵

The Duke of Somerset was the league's first president in the post-war years, serving from 1918 to 1922. Somerset's tenure was tumultuous, overseeing the abandonment of what many viewed as some of the core tenets of Navy League policy – in particular, the political promotion of British naval supremacy. The appointment of the Duke of Sutherland in 1922 saw the league reassume its self-appointed role as custodian of British naval interests. Sutherland was also president of the Air League, president of the Primrose League – the latter formed in 1883 to promote Conservative values – as well as under-secretary of state for air from 1922 to 1924.³⁶ While Sutherland oversaw the Navy League's return to a policy more akin to its pre-war programme, his work as under-secretary of state for air meant he was 'not able to take an active part in the work of the Executive Committee'.³⁷ Sutherland also stressed that the 'very strong interests' he maintained 'in connection with the air', his leadership of the Air League and the competing 'questions that must arise from time to time in regard to the two services' made it 'very difficult to fill the role' of Navy League president. He accordingly informed the league's Grand Council Meeting (GCM) in 1924 that 'I have always made it my duty to watch the interests both of the Navy and of the Air Force, but I feel I cannot adequately do both, and I feel that it is primarily the duty of an ex-Minister from the Admiralty to watch these great interests in the Navy'.³⁸ Accordingly, Lord Linlithgow was chosen to replace Sutherland as president of the Navy League.

Linlithgow served as civil lord of the Admiralty from 1922 to 1924 and later became the viceroy of India. Linlithgow presided over a period of increased political activity, particularly surrounding the Singapore Naval Base in 1924 and the failed Geneva Naval Conference in 1927, before being replaced by Lord Lloyd in 1930. George Ambrose Lloyd, 1st Baron Lloyd, was a diehard Conservative politician and one of the earliest advocates of rearmament within his party.³⁹ Lloyd was previously governor of Bombay and then high commissioner to Egypt. Lloyd's position as president was by no means ceremonial. Unlike his predecessors, Lloyd was directly involved in the league's daily operations, seldom missing

Executive Committee meetings and carrying out extensive work on behalf of the league. The league provided a platform for Lloyd to lobby both public and parliamentary circles for rearmament and he did so tirelessly, with 'his debunking of collective security turn[ing] him into the bugbear of idealistic internationalists'.⁴⁰

Each Navy League president had some form of military experience; all permanent general secretaries were ex-servicemen; two of the four chairmen were ex-servicemen; all deputy presidents were military veterans or had held positions in the Admiralty; and a number of the league's honorary treasurers also had a military background. The league's Executive Committee was similarly replete with veterans. Of course, having served in the military did not necessarily make these figures martial or militaristic in their outlook, but it is important to note the strongly military complexion of the league's most senior figures.

While the league's leadership was largely dominated by aristocrats and the elite, it sought to appeal to 'people of all classes, interests and ages'.⁴¹ As in the case of liberal internationalist bodies such as the LNU, it was important for the Navy League to both remain 'above party' and to reach 'all classes of citizenhood'.⁴² Despite this, elements of its propaganda were designed to cultivate sea-mindedness among specifically working-class audiences.⁴³ Indeed, the first page of the first issue of *The Navy League Journal* stressed that 'There is the working-man to be converted. His clubs echo with socialistic denunciations and detractions of an imperial policy. He is only half convinced of the value of our Empire, and but a lukewarm supporter of large Naval Budgets.' To remedy this, the league called for its members to 'be at him and teach him . . . The lower classes can be led, but they want leaders, men with the courage of their opinions, men with devotion to the great ideals at which this nation should aim.'⁴⁴

The league's desire to reach and educate the 'working man' extended well into the interwar period, where it sought to impress upon the 'man in the street', and members of the working class in particular, the 'absolute necessity of maintaining adequate sea force for the defence of the coast lines and trade routes of the Empire'.⁴⁵ In the 1930s, the league increasingly framed questions surrounding labour, employment and economic decline in relation to Britain's naval position. By expanding the Royal Navy, the league reasoned that this would 're-open many building slips in the derelict shipbuilding areas which, owing to our efforts to promote disarmament, have been disused for years, and which used to employ thousands of skilled craftsmen now in receipt of Unemployment Relief'.⁴⁶ The apparent decline in British shipping was so serious for the Navy League that it meant 'unemployment and loss of wealth in peace. In war it must mean disaster'.⁴⁷

The Air League

Like the Navy League, the complexion of the Air League differed little from other pressure groups and civic associations of the period, most of whom sought out 'noble patrons, titled figureheads, wealthy donors and powerful champions in order to bring prestige to their respective causes'.⁴⁸ Such figures can be traced through the Air League's Executive Committee and list of vice presidents, which contained an eclectic array of politicians, government officials, military theorists, journalists, ex-servicemen and technocrats. The league also had a number of aviation pioneers among its ranks, including Alan Cobham, perhaps best known for his flight to Australia and back in 1926; J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon, the first Englishman to fly a circular mile; the Marquess of Clydesdale, the first pilot to fly over the summit of Mount Everest; and Alan Bott, the First World War flying ace. Air League policy was largely shaped by Executive Committee members and various chairmen, including Philip Foster, Dr Gerald Merton, Frederick Guest and Lord Mottistone. In particular, the league's secretary generals – principally P.R.C. Groves and J.A. Chamier – proved influential in shaping the character and direction of the league as we shall see.⁴⁹ Although Sutherland's tenure as under-secretary of state for air assisted the league in cultivating allies among the Air Ministry, his presidency of the Air League was largely ornamental, with the 'working arrangements of the League [left] in the hands of the Executive Committee'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Sutherland rarely attended Executive Committee meetings and, as he frequently travelled abroad, even expressed his willingness to 'give way to someone able to devote more time to the interest of the League'.⁵¹ This was rejected and Sutherland remained as president, but he was certainly less active than his counterparts in the Navy League.

By 1919, the league had an official organ – *The Aerial League Bulletin* (1919–20). This was subsequently replaced by *Air League Bulletin* (1920–27); *Air* (1927–31) – a much more lavish production which aimed to 'achieve a far wider circulation' than its predecessors; *Air and Airways* (1931–3); and, finally, *Air Review* (1934–9).⁵² These changes resulted from attempts to reach the widest possible audience, as in the case of the production of *Air*, as well as the occasionally parlous financial condition of the league, as in the decision to merge *Air* with *Airways* to create the periodical *Air and Airways*.⁵³ Such journals provide a unique and invaluable insight into the aims and attitudes of the league and its leadership. Moreover, although not the sole vector for disseminating the league's message, the 'very act of publishing a journal was a sign that a pressure group had "arrived" in the political community'.⁵⁴ In addition, local and national newspapers, alongside leading aviation journals such as *Flight* and *The Aeroplane*,

provided extensive coverage and commentary on the league's work. Like the Navy League, the Air League's message was spread beyond Britain through branches in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa.⁵⁵ It established a number of domestic branches, however for the most part, activities were conducted centrally from the league's offices in London.⁵⁶

Throughout the interwar years, the league organised lectures, issued pamphlets and letters to the press, staged exhibitions, hosted public meetings, lobbied in parliamentary spheres, organised Empire Air Day and created the ADCC. While the league was often militaristic in its public pronouncements, it was not an unrelenting detractor of the state or the Air Ministry. In fact, its policy in the late 1920s and early 1930s was even considered pacific by some, prompting the resignation of several leading members.⁵⁷

Aviation attracted a range of figures from the upper echelons of society including aristocrats, wealthy industrialists, professionals and senior military figures – all of whom were among the Air League's senior ranks. As David Cannadine has shown, the aristocracy were 'well disposed to modernity and to technological progress' and prided themselves on 'being – in the language of the time – "airminded"'.⁵⁸ For members of Britain's aristocracy and upper class, flight was an important tool through which to engage with adventure, recreation, propaganda and a 'little politicking'.⁵⁹ While many among the upper class embraced the aeroplane as a means to promote Britain's imperial interests and to reinforce existing social and political hierarchies, there were genuine attempts to democratise flying and foster airmindedness across all sections of British society.⁶⁰ As we shall see, the Air League instituted a variety of schemes that attempted to offset the prohibitive cost of flying, its educational and youth initiatives attempted to reach a broad, cross-class audience and its most successful initiative, Empire Air Day, was designed to appeal to the 'man in the street'.

In its very first edition, *The Aerial League Bulletin* declared that 'the strength of the League is its membership. If we can double our membership, then we treble the power of the League to reach its great objective – the sustained supremacy of the British Empire in the air both in commerce and war.'⁶¹ Viewed in terms of membership figures alone, seemingly never reaching beyond 8,000 members, the Air League failed in its objective. However, such numbers were never a reflection of the league's impact and belie the local, national and even global significance of its work. As Uri Bialer writes, 'its impact and importance should not be under-estimated. The League constructed a highly effective propaganda machine, which both united its members and widened the

sphere of their collective influence.' The league, Bialer asserts, 'mobilized virtually everybody connected with civil and military aviation in Britain, professionals as well as amateur enthusiasts, and in so doing helped to foster a climate of "air awareness" among the British public at large'.⁶²

Although certainly the most influential, the Air League was not the sole associational body concerned with aviation. The Aeronautical Society (renamed the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS) in 1918) was formed in 1866 and maintained a long-standing belief in the mechanical possibilities of flight. The Aero Club (the Royal Aero Club (RAC) from 1910) was established in 1901 and was primarily interested in ballooning and other forms of flight. To define the nature, scope and activities of each society, the three organisations met in April 1909. It was agreed that the Aeronautical Society would be the 'paramount scientific authority on aeronautical matters', the Aero Club would be recognised as 'the paramount body in all matters of sport, and the development of the art of aeronautics' and the Air League would serve as 'the paramount body for patriotic movements and for education'.⁶³

Despite its propagandistic and educational endeavours, by the mid-1920s there were concerns surrounding the Air League's public profile. As a result, the league sought to renew the 'Tripartite Agreement' with the RAeS and RAC. In late 1925, it invited members from each organisation to serve on its Executive Committee. Both the RAeS and RAC rejected proposals, although the former assured the league that it wanted to help in 'every possible way' while the latter insisted that it was still 'most anxious to assist and support the Air League'.⁶⁴ Discussions continued and a committee was eventually established to examine the league's structure and propagandistic work.⁶⁵

Chaired by Viscount Burnham, then proprietor of *The Daily Telegraph*, the Burnham Committee was formed in late 1926 in response to accusations that the league 'had failed to carry out its function as a propaganda body and had neither aroused the public conscience to the need for a stronger Air arm in Imperial Defence, nor to the vital importance of Civil aviation'.⁶⁶ Eight meetings took place over four months, considering the constitution and conduct of the league, as well as how it could more effectively rouse public interest in aviation.⁶⁷ It was ultimately decided that a joint standing committee – comprising members of the RAeS and RAC – should be formed and that the appointment of an efficient organising secretary was required, with P.R.C. Groves – influential air-power theorist – the figure chosen. Groves agreed to the position of secretary general, albeit on the proviso that he would have free rein in the reorganisation of the league, serving in this capacity until 1929. The committee was significant in reshaping the Air League's policy and organisation.

Furthermore, the appointment of Groves lent the league a sense of legitimacy and visibility that, for some, it otherwise lacked.

Finances, funding and the far right

At first glance, the financial history of the two leagues appears rather unremarkable. Each league depended upon membership subscriptions, donations and a series of fundraising initiatives. Both leagues had a tiered membership structure which, in many respects, indicated the class and social status of subscribers. For instance, individuals could join the Air League as associate members, members, fellows or vice presidents (later as patrons) either annually or for life depending on the size of their contribution.⁶⁸ Although such sources provided moderately steady revenue streams, neither league was immune from national economic decline. As the Navy League's annual report for 1931 underlined, while the impact of the Great Depression had 'not been so serious as might have been feared', a number of league members 'found themselves compelled to retrench and to reduce or withhold altogether their subscriptions until times improve'.⁶⁹ The same year, Sutherland reflected that the Air League was 'among the first to feel the effects of financial stringency'.⁷⁰ The following year, Frederick Guest, then chairman of the league, feared that 'unless immediate steps were taken to strengthen the financial position of the League, bankruptcy was inevitable'.⁷¹ By 1935, the league was financially stable enough to stress that its purpose was 'not to accumulate money and therefore efforts should be made to spend as much as possible in the cause of British aviation'.⁷²

Membership subscriptions, donations and fundraising schemes were common revenue sources for non-party pressure groups of the period. Less common, however, was the series of clandestine and controversial financial links maintained by the Navy and Air Leagues with a variety of individuals and organisations connected with the far right, fascism and pro-German sentiments. Furthermore, as fully examined in [Chapter 3](#), each league received support from private armament manufacturers. This prompted particularly staunch opposition – from newspapers, peace activists and officials on the 1935–6 Royal Commission on the Private Manufacture of and Trading in Arms. While such links shed important light on the institutional and organisational histories of the Navy and Air Leagues, they also reveal much about the wider economics of organised militarism.

While both the Navy and Air Leagues claimed to be independent of party and vested interests, one can certainly question each organisation's

assertion to be 'above party'. For instance, the Air League's Executive Committee and list of vice-presidents throughout the 1930s was strongly Conservative in complexion, with few prominent Liberal or Labour representatives. In appointing the Labour MP Lieut.-Commander J.M. Kenworthy as a vice president in 1928, Groves suggested it was necessary to 'stress [the Air League's] non-Party character'.⁷³

In his investigation of the pre-war Navy League, Johnson notes that historians 'interested in British navalism have typically portrayed it as a phenomenon of the political right'.⁷⁴ In fact, as Johnson demonstrates, navalism was not merely the preserve of the political right, but instead appealed to figures across the political spectrum. In particular, Liberal participation with the navalist agenda was much greater than previously acknowledged.⁷⁵ However, while the league's claim to be above party was not disingenuous, and Liberal engagement with the organisation should not be neglected, there were certainly strong links with the Navy League and the political right after 1918.

Both the Navy and Air Leagues had a number of personal and financial links with far right, fascist and pro-German organisations such as the British Union of Fascists (BUF), the January Club, the Anglo-German Fellowship and The Link. The Navy League also relied on donations from several individuals on the political right. Lady Houston, owner of the right-wing *Saturday Review* and a critic of Ramsay MacDonald's National Government, donated £5,000 to the SCC in the early 1930s and a further £10,000 to the league in 1936 to carry out a national propaganda campaign.⁷⁶ In justifying such donations, Houston stated that if she had 'the vast number of millions treacherously wasted' by MacDonald 'on *Peace Conferences*, the British Navy would now be great and glorious as it used to be, and Britannia again would "Rule the Waves"'.⁷⁷ Alongside Houston, Lord Nuffield, philanthropist and motor manufacturer, was a financier of both the Navy League's SCC and Oswald Mosley's New Party, its journal *Action* and the party's youth movement.⁷⁸ Navy League officials additionally considered approaching organisations such as the British Fascists (formed in 1923) for assistance in raising funds on Trafalgar Day.⁷⁹ Alongside such financial links, Navy League members were part of a range of right-wing organisations in the period.

Viscount Lymington, Navy League chairman from 1934 to 1936, was an important member of the English Mistry, a 'reactionary ultra-royalist, anti-democratic body', and later formed the English Array, a back-to-the-land movement and 'more specifically pro-Nazi than the Mistry'.⁸⁰ He met Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring in 1931, was part of the January Club and later became a member of the far-right group, the British People's Party.⁸¹ Lord Sydenham of Combe, deputy president of the league from

1926 to 1932, was similarly a member of a number of right-wing organisations, such as the Liberty League, the Britons and the *Centre International d'Études sur le Fascisme*. He was also a leading writer for the pro-German newspaper, the *Patriot*.⁸²

In addition to such links, Sir Edmund Freemantle, an Executive Committee member in the 1920s and former vice chairman, was part of the British Fascists.⁸³ Michael Beaumont, Conservative MP and Executive Committee member, was part of the January Club and the English Mistery, while Victor Raikes, fellow Conservative MP and Navy League member, was a founding member of the English Review Group and the pro-Franco group, Friends of Nationalist Spain.⁸⁴ Fellow Navy League member Admiral Wilmot Nicholson was a member of the Right Club, the Anglo-German Fellowship and was a signatory of the 'Link letter' sent to *The Times* on 12 October 1938 which called for closer 'friendship and cooperation between Great Britain and Germany' to establish 'enduring peace'.⁸⁵ Captain Bernard Acworth, who spoke on Navy League platforms with Nicholson, was also a signatory of the letter and founded the anti-Semitic Liberty Restoration League.⁸⁶ The political associations of Nicholson and Acworth were particularly concerning for the league. This was especially so following a lecture given to a local Navy League branch in Kensington by both men in 1935, after which *The Jewish Chronicle* accused them of using the platform for anti-Semitic propaganda.⁸⁷ It reported that 'malicious aspersions against Jews were uttered' by Nicholson, Acworth and by members of the BUF who attended the meeting in uniform.⁸⁸ The league distanced itself from such statements – and Acworth eventually won a libel action against the newspaper – yet the political affinities of its members clearly brought into question the league's claims to be above party.⁸⁹

Other league members who had links with the political right, or were involved in far-right groups following their time with the league, included Patrick Hannon, Colonel John Gretton and Arnold White.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Leo Amery, Admiral Sir Sydney Freemantle (Edmund's eldest son) and Lord Carson were all members of the English Review Luncheon Club, while Lymington also wrote for the far-right journal *English Review*. The Luncheon Club, which hosted speeches from Navy League figures including Amery, Carson and Lloyd, was launched by Douglas Jerrold, editor of *English Review*. Perhaps most remarkably, Jerrold and English Review Club members suggested that Lord Lloyd could directly challenge Stanley Baldwin's government and become a prospective 'temporary dictator'.⁹¹ In support of Lloyd's potential leadership bid, Lady Houston offered £100,000, stating that it was 'the most patriotic thing I could possibly do for my Country'.⁹² This was not purely the 'fantasy

of rightist intellectuals', but, as Bernhard Dietz notes, was spoken of in similar terms by high-circulation tabloids such as the *Daily Express*, who suggested Lloyd would make 'an excellent dictator . . . He is an almost fanatical patriot.'⁹³

Ultimately, the leadership bid failed, but this was not Lloyd's only connection with the political right. Lloyd was a member of the January Club, spoke at meetings (albeit on the condition that his speeches were not published) and reportedly indicated a willingness to join the BUF.⁹⁴ According to Churchill, Lloyd was also on 'friendly terms' with Benito Mussolini.⁹⁵ On the Navy League's Ladies' Committee, meanwhile, Christobel Nicholson was a member of the Right Club and the Anglo-German Fellowship. Along with her husband, she was close friends with Captain Ramsay, founder of the Right Club, and Vice-Admiral Barry Domville, founder of The Link.⁹⁶ Lady Sydenham of Combe, fellow Ladies' Committee member, was part of the British Fascisti, Britain's first fascist movement, and director of its youth group, the Fascist Children's Club.⁹⁷

Of course, attendance at meetings or even membership of such organisations did not necessarily imply an ideological affinity for fascism, especially during the 1920s when British fascism was 'not so much fascist in an Italian or German understanding of the term, but distinctly British and Conservative in its support for the established constitution and the Conservative party'.⁹⁸ Although a number of leading Navy League figures clearly did maintain some sympathy and admiration for fascist regimes in the 1930s – even if such sentiments were largely not expressed publicly – most were primarily concerned with threats to Britain's status as a global power.⁹⁹ Moreover, most members staunchly promoted rearmament – confirming Edgerton's observation that being pro-German did not necessarily mean being anti-rearmament.¹⁰⁰

Like the Navy League, the Air League had various links to the far right. J.A. Chamier, the league's secretary general from 1933, and Colonel Norman Thwaites, editor of the *Air* and acting secretary general in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were associates of the January Club. The former was also reportedly a generous financial backer of the BUF, while the latter became the club's chairman in 1934 (and later joined the Anglo-German Fellowship).¹⁰¹ Rear-Admiral Murray Sueter was a member of all the main pro-German and pro-air leagues in the 1930s; Sir William Joynson-Hicks, an Air League vice president, was of the political right; while Colonel the Master of Sempill, a senior Air League member and a Navy League associate, was also a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship and The Link.¹⁰² Moore-Brabazon, at various times a member of the Air League's Executive Committee and a vice president, was a long-time friend of Oswald Mosley, nearly joined his New Party in the early 1930s and was still speaking

in support of Mosley in 1939.¹⁰³ The Marquess of Clydesdale was both a member of the Air League's Executive Committee and the Anglo-German Fellowship.¹⁰⁴ Sir Harry Brittain, a league and ADCC council member, was part of the Anglo-German Fellowship and president of the Friends of Italy. Francis Yeats-Brown, fellow member of the league's Executive Committee and best known as the author of *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, was later part of the January Club, the Anglo-German Fellowship and an admirer of Mussolini.¹⁰⁵

Finally, Lord Mottistone, the Air League's chairman from 1932 and former president, was an 'intimate of [Joachim von] Ribbentrop's' and a 'considerable apologist for Nazi Germany'.¹⁰⁶ While serving as the league's chairman, Mottistone visited von Ribbentrop in 1933 and returned to Germany onboard his boat, *Mayflower*, in 1935.¹⁰⁷ He subsequently informed the House of Lords that his 'many interviews with Herr Hitler', whom Mottistone described as a 'remarkable man', had convinced him that the German leader was 'absolutely truthful, sincere and unselfish'.¹⁰⁸

Although many of these figures were crucial in the formation of Air League policy, most of these affinities remained private and it is difficult to trace their direct bearing on the league's aims and activities. As in the case of the Navy League, any pro-German sentiment or fascist sympathies certainly did not prevent Air League members from vigorously lobbying for aerial supremacy. Of course, the Air League's focus on youth, physical culture and masculinity had clear parallels with the dictatorship countries as will be explored in [Chapter 5](#). Similarly, Empire Air Day – a setting in which power, modernity and technological innovation was staged to both domestic and global audiences – had distinct similarities with fascist public ritual and military spectacle. Indeed, as Robert Wohl suggests, 'although there is nothing inherently fascist about flying, in the atmosphere of the 1930s it is easy to see how people could make the connection'.¹⁰⁹

The Navy League, the Air League and officialdom

Alongside the extensive links between both leagues and the political right, there were various ties between each organisation and the state, while members of the royal family supported numerous Navy and Air League initiatives.¹¹⁰ David Lloyd George also subscribed to the Air League while prime minister, although he was not an active member.¹¹¹ Ex-servicemen and retired officers made up a significant section of both the Navy and Air League's membership. By the early 1930s, every admiral

of the fleet on the active and retired list consented (without exception) to become an honorary vice president of the Navy League.¹¹² Perhaps unsurprisingly, such connections drew criticism, with Noel-Baker asking 'is it not certain that the Admiralty, the Department which buys our ships of war, and indeed the public, are likely to listen with attention to a body with such eminent support?'¹¹³ While the Navy League was not uncritical of the Admiralty, relations between the two bodies were stronger than prior to the First World War. Earl David Beatty, first sea lord of the Admiralty from 1919 to 1927, felt that it was 'wholly desirable that there should be some such organization as the Navy League', while Lord Ernle Chatfield, then fourth sea lord, stated that 'if we had not a Navy League now we should have to create one'. As Christopher Bell argues, 'Naval decision-makers valued the Navy League because it could and did appeal directly to the public, something the navy felt itself unable to do'.¹¹⁴

The Navy League was conscious of such connections. In considering the appointment of a new chairman in 1933, Lloyd felt that 'it was important that the position should be occupied by a civilian and somebody who held a prominent position in political life rather than a distinguished Naval Officer'.¹¹⁵ Despite attempts to distance itself from the Admiralty, numerous figures all publicly supported the Navy League, particularly in its commemoration of Trafalgar Day and in the creation of the SCC.

As in the case of the Navy League and the Admiralty, the many links of personnel between the Air League and Air Ministry go some way to explaining the often-symbiotic relationship between the two. As noted, the Duke of Sutherland was under-secretary of state for air from 1922 to 1924 and a cousin of Lord Londonderry, secretary of state for air from 1931 to 1935. Chamier served in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in the First World War and remained as the corps was transformed into the RAF. He became technical director at the Air Ministry in 1927 and then air commodore in 1928, holding this position until his retirement in 1929. Like Chamier, Groves served in the RFC during the First World War. He became the director of flying operations at the Air Ministry in 1918 and was the Air Ministry's representative at the Paris Peace Conference, eventually retiring in 1922.¹¹⁶ Lord Mottistone briefly served as under-secretary of state for air in 1919, while Moore-Brabazon served as Winston Churchill's private secretary when the latter was secretary of state for war and air.¹¹⁷

Among the league's vice-presidents, Frederick Guest was secretary of state for air from 1921 to 1922, while Lord Weir was president of the Air Council in 1918, industrial advisor to the Air Ministry, personal advisor to Lord Swinton during his time as secretary of state for air from 1935 to 1938 and was at the first Defence Requirements Committee Meeting.¹¹⁸ Lord Thomson, secretary of state for air in 1924 and from 1929 to 1930,

was a vice president of the league, albeit in between his terms at the Air Ministry.¹¹⁹ The league invited Sir Samuel Hoare to become a member of its Executive Committee in 1930, following his second tenure as secretary of state for air (1924–9), although he was unable to join, citing numerous other commitments.¹²⁰

Additional Air League members who had connections to the Air Ministry included Sueter, an important wartime naval aviator, and Sempill who, like many of his fellow league members, served in the RFC. Admiral Mark Kerr, deputy chief of the Air Staff at the Air Ministry in 1918, was on the league's Executive Committee for a time and attended several annual general meetings (AGMs). Sir John Salmond, the retired marshal of the RAF, also served on the league's Executive Committee and was the ADCC's chairman. Finally, there were links of personnel between the Air League and the RAF Benevolent Fund (established in 1919 to provide assistance to RAF personnel and their dependents). Lord Wakefield, chairman of the fund, was a vice president of the league, while Mottistone, Sutherland and several other Air League members were vice presidents.¹²¹ Wakefield also supported the league financially, donating to the Young Pilots' Fund and the ADCC.¹²²

Complementing such links, the Air League carried out work directly with the Air Ministry – or that required Air Ministry support – and had various figures who previously held important roles within the ministry, RFC and RAF engage in work on its behalf. One of the most notable figures in this respect was Sir William Sefton Brancker, who retired from the RAF as master-general of personnel in 1919 and was appointed director of civil aviation in 1922. Brancker was involved in a range of league activities, attended meetings and worked on its behalf to find a new president. While such connections do not necessarily imply an affinity between Air Ministry and league, and although some figures only acted in an ex-officio capacity, this in part explains why the league was not always the most vociferous critic of the Air Ministry.

Associations with the Air Ministry were so strong that Air League members occasionally felt the need to publicly distance the league from officialdom. For instance, J.M. Kenworthy (later Lord Strabolgi) assured his audience at the league's annual dinner in 1929 that he was not merely 'Lord Thomson's gramophone'.¹²³ Conversely, certain league officials advised closer cooperation. The Burnham Committee suggested that for the Air League 'to fulfil its role in awakening popular interest in aviation, the recognition, and even the support on appropriate occasions, of the Air Ministry is essential'.¹²⁴ Moore-Brabazon similarly noted that it 'had attacked the Air Ministry and the man in the street was not interested . . . It was necessary to see where the League could work side by side

with the Air Ministry and help them get ahead.’¹²⁵ While the league was clearly more than a conduit for the dissemination of Air Ministry views, there were numerous and nuanced connections which, rather than being merely symbolic, directly shaped the Air League’s policies and activities.

Women in the Navy and Air Leagues

The promotion of naval and aerial supremacy was not an exclusively male domain. For instance, not only was Lady Houston a prominent and notable advocate of the Navy League’s work, but she was also a staunch proponent of an ‘airminded nationalism’ as will be discussed in [Chapter 4](#).¹²⁶ Women’s league-related activism further challenges the ‘age-old binary opposition twinning femininity with the values of pacifism and masculinity with those of militarism’. While such oppositions are always ‘imaginatively constructed’, the ‘maternalist–pacifist discourse has proven highly resilient’.¹²⁷ The work of women within the two leagues also complicates Hendley’s distinction between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ patriotic leagues; masculine leagues being primarily partisan and militaristic in nature while the latter were concerned with issues such as education, philanthropy and social activities.¹²⁸ Not only did the two leagues display ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ characteristics as defined above, but militarism and patriotism were championed by women within both leagues producing a somewhat ‘paradoxical mix of gender traditionalism and gender modernity’.¹²⁹

One of the most significant areas of work performed by women in the Navy League was the Ladies’ Emergency Committee. Presided over by Admiral Lord Beresford, former MP, the committee was formed immediately following the outbreak of the First World War to provide ‘comforts’ such as ‘warm garments, games, tobacco and other articles for officers and men in the Fleet’.¹³⁰ In early 1915, the committee had already collected 7 tons of chocolate alone and, by 1916, the committee estimated that it had sent parcels of warm clothing and over 600,000 items to more than 700 ships.¹³¹ By 1918, the committee claimed that ‘[m]any millions of garments’ had passed through its hands. It also estimated that it had supplied over 82 tons of hospital equipment to Royal Naval hospitals and hospital ships, and had sent vast amounts of food and clothing to prisoners of war.¹³²

Women were present on the Navy League’s Executive Committee throughout the interwar years – although it remained male-dominated – and were active at league events including GCMs and Trafalgar Day banquets. Women served in secretarial roles, were active in local branches

and spoke on league platforms. Lectures were given in schools and libraries, and to local Navy League branches, rotary clubs and a number of other forums on subjects including naval heritage and tradition, key naval engagements of the First World War, the navy and empire, and the importance of the navy for trade, commerce and communication. Women were often far more active than their male counterparts in lecturing and, as lectures formed an important part of the league's work, such activities should not be understated.¹³³ Women also played a central part in the more ceremonial and symbolic aspects of the league's work. It was predominantly women who placed a wreath at the foot of Nelson's tomb in St Paul's Cathedral on Trafalgar Day. The Ladies' Committee, however, was largely limited to organising social events and charitable activities. Despite this, women made important contributions to the activities and organisation of the Navy League throughout the period.

Like their Navy League counterparts, women within the Air League were involved in a variety of activities. Alongside the Air League, the WAL was formed in May 1909. Lady Alice O'Hagan occupied the chair, while Aimee Watt Smyth was the league's secretary. Among its founding members were Agnes Baden-Powell, Mary Fraser, Ellen Blount, Beatrice Fry and Anna Massy.¹³⁴ Although the WAL was distinct from the main Air League, there were links of objectives and personnel, close contact between each association and considerations for an amalgamation of the two leagues on several occasions.¹³⁵

At the WAL's public inauguration in May 1909, its policy and objectives were established. It aimed to 'secure and maintain for the Empire the same supremacy in the air as it now enjoys on the sea'.¹³⁶ Previous assessments have dismissed the WAL as making 'no real effort to mobilise women in the air campaign'.¹³⁷ Yet, it carried out an extensive programme of education and political campaigning, making specific appeals for 'all British women to join its ranks' alongside attempting to shape broader public opinion.¹³⁸ Lectures, tours, meetings, newspaper articles, the distribution of league literature and various forms of aerial theatre were used to promote airmindedness within British society. Less characteristic of pressure-group practices were fundraising efforts to build an all-British airship. Lauded as 'a tangible illustration of the energy and patriotism of the women of Great Britain', the scheme promoted British engineering, science and technology.¹³⁹ While a competing airship scheme launched by *The Morning Post* praised the technological progress of France and Germany, the WAL instead called for the building of an 'all-British airship by British mechanics of British materials'.¹⁴⁰ Despite the WAL's success, and the support it accrued from a range of influential figures, it

was unable to enjoy the same longevity as the Air League and wound up in July 1915.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, women continued to play a role in the Air League after the First World War. The question of a 'Women's Air League Committee' and a 'Ladies Auxiliary Committee' was brought up on several occasions in the 1920s, yet the form and scope of suggestions were far more limited than the pre-war WAL. In considering forming a Ladies Auxiliary Committee in 1923, the league suggested that it could 'assist in the promotion and organisation of the social events and functions of the League', could 'create and organise a bureau of women speakers prepared to address women's meetings on the subject of the need for British Air Supremacy' and could 'co-operate in the establishment of branches of the Air League throughout the country and Empire'.¹⁴² However, despite the limited nature of proposals, it seemed to go little further than discussions within the league's Executive Committee.

When plans for a Women's Air Circle were placed before the league in 1928, it conceived of such a group in similar terms. The league noted that it 'might be useful in organising social functions, dinners, receptions etc., but that any new organisation with separate offices and subscriptions was not desirable'.¹⁴³ The Women's Committee was created in 1928 and included many of the most prominent female aviators in the country on its council: most members either held a pilot's licence or had expressed an interest in acquiring one, while many of its members were involved in pioneering, record-breaking flights.¹⁴⁴ Such figures regularly contributed articles to *Air* on general aviation matters, flying as a career for women, and aviation and youth.¹⁴⁵ Members of the Women's Committee also attended events on behalf of the Air League, including international aeronautical exhibitions and the opening of aerodromes in Britain.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Women's Committee provided a limited number of women with the opportunity to gain a pilot's licence by instituting the Flying Scholarship Scheme.¹⁴⁷ Although the Duke of Sutherland felt that it had 'rendered an invaluable service to the League and to the cause of British aviation', the Women's Committee was never extensively involved in the league's affairs.¹⁴⁸ The Air League did invite notable aviators such as the Duchess of Bedford and Lady Bailey to become vice presidents, while the aviator Elsie Mackay served on the league's Advisory Committee of Airmen.¹⁴⁹ It also appointed two women – initially Lady Heath and Madame de Landa (chair and deputy chair of the Women's Committee, respectively) – to its Executive Committee (Kathleen Burn, Countess of Drogheda; Eileen Forbes-Sempill (née Lavery) and Lady Elibank also later served on the Executive Committee).¹⁵⁰

One of the Women's Committee's first events was a luncheon for Amelia Earhart, championing her achievements as an aviator.¹⁵¹ However, the committee was not without wider ambition. Lady Bailey, who replaced Lady Heath as chair in January 1929, proposed the formation of Women's Committees in every county throughout Britain, although this was not pursued due to financial constraints.¹⁵² By December 1932, the reorganisation of the Air League's Executive Committee to include members from the RAC and RAeS forced the resignations of Drogheda and Elibank; this was the last time women served on the Executive Committee in the 1930s.¹⁵³ By May 1933, the league was talking of 'reviving' the Women's Committee, indicating that it had ceased activities: all evidence suggests this is the case.¹⁵⁴

Charity

Alongside their propagandistic endeavours, both the Navy and Air Leagues were involved in a considerable range of charitable and philanthropic schemes. The Navy League made charitable work a focal point of its activities during the First World War. By the end of the conflict, the league either controlled or directed the Overseas Relief Fund, the Minesweepers' Fund, the Merchant Service Fund, the Navy League Education Fund, the Nelson Day Fund, the Ladies' Emergency Committee and the Royal Navy Prisoners of War Fund.¹⁵⁵ The Overseas Relief Fund was one of the most significant and long-standing charitable schemes under the league's control. Established following the Battle of Jutland in 1916, it aimed to provide general relief and educational assistance to the orphans and other dependents of those who lost their life in the Navy and Merchant Service during the First World War.¹⁵⁶ By 1928, the fund had raised over half a million pounds for relief and educational purposes.¹⁵⁷

In addition to such schemes, the league was engaged in several other charitable endeavours throughout the First World War. The Sailors' Day Fund was inaugurated by the formation of a joint committee of the Navy League and the British and Foreign Sailors' Society, with an appeal being issued to the heads of all municipalities throughout Britain. The fund was largely for the benefit of the Mercantile Marine and for the training of boys for sea services. The league also organised the Jack Cornwell Memorial Fund in July 1916. Cornwell was only sixteen when he suffered mortal wounds at his post during the Battle of Jutland, for which he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross medal. The fund asked school-children throughout Britain and the empire for donations to fund the establishment of a ward for sailors with a disability at the Star and Garter

Home in Richmond. The response was high with millions of schoolchildren reportedly subscribing a penny to the fund, with the first instalment of £18,000 being presented to Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace in early 1917.¹⁵⁸

Like the Navy League, the Air League was concerned with those who would be affected by the conflict domestically, forming the Royal Flying Corps Families Relief Fund in 1914. This was designed to 'help and comfort' the wives and children of men of the RFC who would be killed or wounded in war.¹⁵⁹ The league worked closely with the War Office, which sent lists of RFC casualties to the league, as well as with the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association.¹⁶⁰ By February 1915, the fund had raised £422.19.4 and by 1916 it was registered under the War Charities Act.¹⁶¹

Charity remained important for the league following the First World War. In May 1919, the Executive Committee considered proposals for the creation of an Orphan Fund for the education and maintenance of children of members of the RFC who lost their lives during the First World War.¹⁶² Although the league viewed its involvement in charitable funds in June 1920 as 'vital to the successful development of the Air League' and, more broadly, as 'essential to the progress of civil aviation', by October the same year, its Executive Committee resolved to hand the remaining funds over to the Royal Flying Forces Memorial Fund.¹⁶³

Conclusion

Writing in January 1919, the Air League noted that it was 'natural' that after a 'period of great effort comes relaxation. After a period of gigantic expenditure comes a cry for economy.' However, it warned that it was a 'mistake to suppose the necessity for propaganda has gone' and that the 'sustained supremacy of the British Empire in the air' could only be achieved by a 'strong driving force of public opinion' which would oblige 'any Government' to 'get on or get out'.¹⁶⁴ The Navy League issued similar appeals, calling on the 'British people to prove themselves wiser than their leaders by insisting on the full maintenance of that naval power which conditions our very existence as a nation'.¹⁶⁵ While the purpose of such propaganda may have been to 'influence public opinion, in order to determine the action of the Government', both leagues also maintained support among numerous figures from the social, political and military elite, the service departments, fascist and pro-German organisations, and members of the royal family.¹⁶⁶ Public and political support ensured that each league was able to operate on a local, national and global scale in a wide range of activities. Indeed, neither league was solely occupied with

the political promotion of naval and aerial supremacy, with social, educational and charitable work representing key areas of activity. Women were central to such work, however patriotism and militarism were also popular rallying calls for many women involved in the two leagues. Clearly, the First World War did not mark the end of organised militarism, although as the next chapter will demonstrate, it did influence the nature and character of each league.

Notes

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4. Michael Humphries, '“Perfectly Secret and Perfectly Democratic”: Lord Esher and the Society of Islanders, 1909–1914', *The English Historical Review*, 127 (2012): 1158; Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.
5. Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 69.
6. Johnson, *Militarism*, 69; N.C. Fleming, 'Empire, Community, and the Limits of “Sea-Mindedness”': The Navy League and Worcester, c. 1896–1914', *Midland History*, 48 (2023): 332.
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8. Duncan Redford, 'Collective Security and Internal Dissent: The Navy League's Attempts to Develop a New Policy towards British Naval Power Between 1919 and the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty', *History*, 96 (2011): 50.
9. W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889–1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), 136–7.
10. Redford, 'Collective Security', 50.
11. N.C. Fleming, 'The Imperial Maritime League: British Navalism, Conflict, and the Radical Right, c.1907–1920', *War in History*, 23 (2016): 297.
12. Fleming, 'Imperial Maritime League', 308–12; NMM, Lionel Graham Horton-Smith Papers, HSM/1, Old Navy League and its Failures; HSM/8, Great Split of the O.N.L. (Old Navy League), 1906–7 and the Rise of the I.M.L. (Imperial Maritime League), 1906–7; HSM/16, Volume of pamphlets and newspaper cuttings: Imperial Maritime League – Junior Branch, 1909–12.
13. Fleming, 'Imperial Maritime League', 296–7; 321.
14. Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 174; 120.
15. NMM, MSY/6/2/4, NLAR 1914, 14. For an overview of the league's activities throughout the conflict, see NMM, MSY/6/2/4, NLAR 1914 and MSY/6/2/5, NLARs, 1915–18.
16. NMM, MSY/6/2/5, NLAR 1918, 8; NLAR 1919, 5.
17. NMM, MSY/6/2/5, NLAR 1919, 5.
18. Redford, 'Collective Security', 49.
19. Brett Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre: Air Displays and Air-mindedness in Britain and Australia Between the World Wars', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019): 486.
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21. Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre', 486.
22. *Daily Mail*, 16 January 1909, 3.
23. For an overview of the WAL, see RAF Museum, AC75/23/17, Women's Aerial League, 'History of the Movement', n.d., 1–4.

24. NAL, ENV16C, Aerial League of the British Empire, Pamphlet, 1909, 2.
25. *Flight*, 10 April 1909, 204.
26. *Flight*, 10 April 1909, 209.
27. *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 1909, 10.
28. NAL, ENV16C, Report of the Preliminary Meeting of the Aerial League of the British Empire, 17 February 1909, 4; *The Army and Navy Gazette*, 10 April 1909, 345; Paris, *Winged Warfare*, 90; *The Times*, 25 May 1911, 8.
29. Privately, Esher was reluctant to align himself with the Air League from the outset. Maurice V. Brett, ed., *Journals and Letters of Reginald, Viscount Esher: Vol. 2, 1903–1910* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd, 1934–8), 396; 425.
30. Paris, *Winged Warfare*, 97.
31. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 2 October 1917, 1.
32. AL, AL Minute Book, Special MEC, 24 March 1920, 1.
33. AL, AL Minute Book, Special MEC, 7 July 1921, 2.
34. AL, AL Minute Book, Special MEC, 7 March 1922, 1.
35. See [Appendix I](#) for a list of the most senior figures within the Navy League's Executive Committee.
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37. *The Navy*, July 1923, 189.
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112. NMM, MSY/6/2/6, NLAR 1933, 2–3.
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123. *Air*, July 1929, 307.
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127. McCarthy, *The British People*, 182.

128. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 66; 139.
129. As in the case of the LNU, McCarthy, *The British People*, 183.
130. NMM, MSY/6/2/4, NLAR 1914, 19–20.
131. *The Navy League Quarterly*, January 1915, 1; NMM, MSY/6/2/5, NLAR 1916, 28.
132. NMM, MSY/6/2/5, NLAR 1918, 19.
133. For example, in 1925 Emily Taylor, a former schoolteacher for the London County Council, gave 84 lectures, while the most active male lecturer for the league only provided 66. In 1931, Miss M.G. Thomson spoke at 100 meetings compared to her nearest male colleague who again only gave 66 lectures. NMM, MSY/6/2/6, NLAR 1925, 3; NLAR 1931, 4.
134. TNA, BT 58/31/COS/1387, The Women's Aerial League of the British Empire, 1909, Letter from the Women's Aerial League to the Secretary of the Board of Trade, 28 May 1909, 3.
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145. For example, see *Air*, April 1928, 18–19; May 1928, 44–5; September 1928, 33–4.
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151. *Flight*, 28 June 1928, 517.
152. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 21 January 1929, 1; 20 March 1929, 1.
153. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 15 December 1932, 1.
154. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 4 May 1933, 2.
155. *Hampshire Telegraph*, 5 July 1918, 7.
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158. Mary Conley, "'Faithful unto Death': Commemorating Jack Cornwell's Service in the Battle of Jutland', in *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War*, ed. James E. Kitchen, Alisa Miller and Laura Rowe

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159. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 14 August 1914, 1.

160. An organisation founded by Major James Gildea in the mid-1880s to assist the widows and children of serving officers. *The Times*, 22 December 1886, 5.

161. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 18 February 1915, 1; TNA, AIR 2/60/24202/18, Offer of Air Force Families Relief Fund, Letter from General H.T. Arbuthnot to the Air Ministry, 11 June 1918, 1.

162. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 9 May 1919, 4; 13 June 1919, 3–4; 9 December 1919, 2.

163. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 1 June 1920, 2; 15 October 1920, 2.

164. *The Aerial League Bulletin*, January 1919, 1.

165. Noel-Baker, *Private Manufacture of Armaments*, 290.

166. Noel-Baker, *Private Manufacture of Armaments*, 293.

Chapter 2

Disarmament, collective security and internationalism

Following his resignation from the Navy League in late 1921, Patrick Hannon – Conservative MP for Birmingham Moseley and a leading league member – declared that the ‘old Navy League has become the laughing stock of the country. From its old condition of a protagonist of the interests of sea power, it has become a bedraggled and demoralised kitchen-maid of the League of Nations Union.’¹ Other Navy League stalwarts, including the naval journalist Arnold White, shared Hannon’s sentiments. Although less trenchant in his criticism, White reflected that the league ‘for some twenty-seven years has been almost the main object of my life. I have seen it grow from tiny things to great things, but now it is apparently a Branch of the League of Nations.’² Almost a decade later, many within the Air League expressed similar concerns about the organisation’s activities and future policy. For Harold Balfour – Air League member, Conservative MP and First World War flying ace – the league’s programme was not nearly ‘aggressive enough as regards the national air strength . . . the policy of the Air League should be one of full blooded patriotism.’³ The league was later criticised along such lines by its former secretary general P.R.C. Groves, who argued that ‘unfortunately the Air League, though it was responsible for considerable criticism in parliament and the press, was not strong enough to carry out its propaganda on a nation-wide scale’.⁴

In the context of the Navy and Air League’s long-standing promotion of naval and aerial supremacy, respectively – and given the frequent accusations of militarism, scaremongering and sensationalism – such criticism is particularly striking. However, both leagues briefly embraced policies that represented fundamental departures from their traditional

aims and principles. In the early 1920s, the Navy League supported the Washington Naval Conference, while in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Air League increasingly focused on civil and commercial aviation, rather than primarily promoting the military potential of flight. While bodies such as the LNU curtailed their more ardently pacific and anti-militarist supporters, both the Navy and Air Leagues attempted to rein in the more overtly militaristic elements of their respective memberships.⁵ Seen by many as an abandonment of the key principles of each organisation, such policies led to the loss of many rank-and-file members, a number of high-profile resignations and even threatened the existence of each league. Support for disarmament and collective security was not, however, an enduring feature of the work of either the Navy or Air League and each quickly reverted to programmes lobbying for naval and aerial supremacy.

In reflecting on the causes of the First World War, many statesmen, politicians and intellectuals concluded that, as the arms race had played a principal part, the 'potentially destabilizing effect of armaments' should be eliminated through disarmament.⁶ Such sentiments led to a series of international disarmament conferences, including the Washington Naval Conference (1921–2), the abortive Geneva Naval Conference (1927), the London Naval Conferences (1930 and 1935–6) and the unsuccessful World Disarmament Conference at Geneva (1932–4). The 'long-standing liberal belief that international law could prevent war' also resulted in widespread support for collective security, particularly through proposals for the internationalisation of aviation and calls for an international air police force (IAPF).⁷ However, the extent to which Britain's decision-makers were committed to disarmament has been the subject of some debate. Dick Richardson, for instance, suggests that with the exception of Lord Robert Cecil, 'the philosophical propensities of the Cabinet and the foreign policy-making elite of the country were sceptical of, if not outrightly opposed to, the whole movement for arms limitation'.⁸ More broadly, disarmament did not necessarily involve the reduction of armaments. As in the case of the London Naval Treaty of 1930 and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, disarmament could relate to 'an agreement in which the level of armaments was *increased* rather than decreased, as it was the agreement to control that was significant rather than solely the agreement to reduce'.⁹ As Britain 'could claim to be the most powerful of the great powers' in the period, the idea that the country 'had unilaterally disarmed in the 1920s and 1930s' is 'clearly untenable'.¹⁰

The post-war growth of societies dedicated to the abolition of war nevertheless testifies to an 'upsurge in popular pacifist sentiment'. Yet, as previously noted, the distinction between 'pacifism' – those opposed

to the use of force in any circumstance – and ‘pacifism’ – those who accepted that military intervention might on occasion be justified – is important to underline. This is especially so because, as Helen McCarthy highlights, the ‘hard-line pacifist position was held by only a small minority of British people’.¹¹ Although disarmament was considered as ‘the great uniting issue of the interwar peace movement’, and while the interwar years may have been ‘a halcyon period for liberal internationalists’, the peace movement was not a single, unified (or necessarily unifying) phenomenon.¹² Moreover, despite the ‘human tragedy and economic upheaval of the war years’, Britain remained a ‘martial nation’ and a ‘warfare state’.¹³

While numerous studies have explored disarmament, collective security and the internationalisation of aviation in interwar Britain, the response of the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire – the two leading naval and aerial lobbying organisations of the period – to such issues has largely been overlooked, if not ignored entirely.¹⁴ Neither league could claim to have directly influenced specific governmental decisions regarding disarmament, but (for the most part) they provided vocal opposition and a ‘background of political pressure’ to initiatives for disarmament and collective security and drew the support of leading political figures in the process.¹⁵ Pressure groups such as the Navy and Air Leagues had the potential to shape (or contribute to) the ideological framework in which such issues were discussed, while also having the capacity to become a ‘disruptive influence’ to those advocating peace through disarmament.¹⁶ Accordingly, this chapter charts the ways in which the two leagues negotiated the rise of issues such as disarmament, arms limitation, pacifism and collective security. It also explores the interactions of both leagues with the post-war peace movement, in particular with the leading liberal internationalist organisation of the period – the LNU. In doing so, the chapter shines a light on the contested and complex attitudes to war and peace in the post-war years, while also providing important insights into the legacies of the First World War and its impact on organised militarism.

‘Pacifist tendencies’

The Navy League

The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, which marked Britain’s symbolic concession of parity with the US Navy, has traditionally been interpreted as ‘heralding the end of British sea power’ and as ‘one of the

major catastrophes of English history'.¹⁷ Although such assessments have since been extensively revised, the response of the Navy League is nonetheless surprising. Far from condemning the treaty, the Navy League praised its 'noble aims' and suggested that it represented the 'highest ideals of British policy'.¹⁸ While the league stressed that its primary object remained unaltered, 'namely, to secure the adequate naval protection of British subjects and commerce the world over', its argument that 'today civilisation is not threatened by any maritime power' and that 'there is no alternative to competitive building of ships of war except an international naval agreement' was remarkable when placed in the context of its long-standing promotion of British sea power.¹⁹

Enacted by V. Biscoe Tritton and Rear-Admiral Ronald Hopwood, the league's then chairman and general secretary, respectively, the Navy League's shift towards embracing international ideals of collective security and the preservation of peace through international agreement led to the resignation of five senior members from its Executive Committee and widespread dissent among local branches.²⁰ As Duncan Redford argues, the failure to lobby for the maintenance of British naval supremacy led to a schism that 'threatened to destroy' the league.²¹ However, such a policy largely aligned with the political, intellectual and financial climate of the immediate post-war period. As N.H. Gibbs writes, 'whatever the criticisms of the Treaty, it did prevent, for the immediate future, a costly naval arms race which Britain was in no state to sustain'.²² More broadly, the Navy League's policy was short-lived.

The decision by Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government to suspend construction on the Singapore Naval Base in 1924 provided a catalyst for renewed Navy League propaganda. As Rhiannon Vickers notes, from the early 1920s internationalist, anti-war voices were highly influential in shaping Labour Party thinking on international affairs. Such influence was certainly evident in MacDonald's decision regarding the Singapore Naval Base.²³ In response, the Navy League circulated a statement to all its branches, and to the popular press, urging that 'the essential safety of the Empire should be secured so that no foreign rival may be tempted by our weakness to reach out the hand for the "glittering prizes" which a disarmed British Empire would offer. More than any other nation we depend upon sea power'.²⁴ At the annual GCM in 1924, Sir Cyril Cobb went further, accusing the Labour government of not having 'a proper sense of Empire . . . nor do they care much whether the Navy, so far as we can judge from their actions, is in a proper position to protect not only the Empire, but all our great trade routes throughout the Empire'.²⁵ As such comments suggest, the league had reassumed its role as 'the public guardians of British naval supremacy'.²⁶

Such sentiments were not confined to the Navy League. High-profile figures including Lord Curzon, Leo Amery and Winston Churchill all spoke at a public meeting organised by the Navy League to protest against the closure of the Singapore Naval Base. Other notable figures supported the league, including Stanley Baldwin, who wrote that he was 'delighted to learn that the Navy League is taking up the question of Singapore'. Baldwin argued that 'there are certain facts which surely no sane person can dispute: They are, that our Navy is essential to our existence, to the maintenance of our trade routes . . . and to the security of our Empire.'²⁷

Building upon its policy surrounding the Singapore Naval Base, the Navy League was one of the most vocal critics of the failed Geneva Naval Conference in 1927. The conference (attended by Britain, the US and Japan) attempted to halt the building of vessels omitted from the Washington Naval Treaty. While an agreement was reached on limits to submarines and destroyers, there was a much greater unwillingness to compromise on cruiser limits. This intransigence, combined with the influence of the respective service departments, meant that the conference ended in failure.²⁸ The British government's refusal to compromise was, perhaps unsurprisingly, supported by the Navy League. The league published extensively on the conference in *The Navy* and, as in other instances, publicly traded blows with the LNU's chairman Gilbert Murray.²⁹ At its GCM in 1927, the league welcomed 'any international agreements that would lessen the chances of friction between nations', but stated that Britain had an 'inalienable right to decide the necessary naval strength of the Empire'. Lord Linlithgow spoke more critically of 'all those who bade us take off our armour in a world where all were armed. Either those persons were imbecile or they took the wages of England's enemies to do their dirty work.'³⁰ Although not expressed in such terms, Baldwin's refusal to limit Britain's potential naval strength was similarly supported at the Conservative Party Conference that year.³¹

Alongside hostility towards the Geneva Naval Conference, the Navy League denounced more wide-ranging international treaties such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. The Kellogg-Briand Pact was an international agreement that outlawed war as an instrument of national policy and, as Daniel Gorman argues, 'signalled a normative shift towards viewing war as illegitimate'.³² Internally, the league ruled that 'there should be no slackening nor alteration of Navy League policy due to the Peace Pact'.³³ Publicly, it suggested that while 'there is no race more desirous of peace than is the British race', the agreement altered little in reality. The league feared that the pact would 'encourage some people to believe the pacifist propaganda which is at present raging for great reduction in our Navy' and stated that '[t]reaties, pacts, and other solemnly signed documents are

all very well in their way, but, as we have learnt from bitter experience, they become "Scraps of Paper" when a nation decides on war as a continuation of policy'.³⁴

In line with its policy surrounding the Singapore Naval Base, the Geneva Naval Conference and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the Navy League was a staunch opponent of the London Naval Conference in 1930. The conference, and subsequent treaty, set a tonnage ratio for cruisers and destroyers of 5:5:3.5 for Britain, the US and Japan, respectively (although this was not agreed upon by France or Italy), while also calling for further cuts in battleship numbers. Although the conference was welcomed by many as an important step towards curtailing international competition in naval armaments, the Navy League was less receptive.³⁵ On the eve of the conference, the league held a public meeting at which Lord Bridgeman, first lord of the Admiralty from 1924 to 1929, welcomed the possibility of ending the international competition in warship building, but stressed that 'nothing should be done which would impair our feeling of security and the power of the Navy to protect these islands, the Empire, and the great trade routes'. Echoing Bridgeman, Lord Lloyd wished the conference success and stressed that the Navy League desired peace, before issuing the reminder that the maintenance of a strong British fleet was a 'matter of life and death'.³⁶

Throughout the conference, the league sent leaflets to MPs, held various public and local branch meetings, lectured throughout the country and issued numerous statements in *The Navy* and in national newspapers.³⁷ Perhaps the greatest publicity generated by the league during the conference resulted from a public meeting held in London in February 1930. At the meeting, a resolution was unanimously passed that called for 'no further reduction in our naval forces'. Winston Churchill, principal speaker, reflected on the 'profound and growing anxiety' among the public and hoped that 'amid the froth and confusion of our present situation' the British nation would still have the 'sanity and resolution to sustain that ancient naval power which across four centuries had so often defended good causes'.³⁸ He added that 'British naval requirements ought to be fixed by ourselves and ourselves alone, because our life depended on them'.³⁹ Shortly thereafter, the LNU privately recorded its anxiety at the apparent lack of progress at the conference.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Gilbert Murray assured the LNU's General Council that it was 'quite clear that what I may call the militarist party – the party that objected to an agreement is beaten . . . They fight like a minority, they speak like a minority, they feel like a minority. This is a great thing'.⁴¹

Despite Murray's claims, figures such as Baldwin and Churchill evidently viewed Navy League meetings as important lobbying platforms.

In a letter to Lord Arthur Balfour, former prime minister, Churchill noted that he had received an informal communication from the Foreign Office prior to his address at the Navy League meeting, informing him that a 'speech threatening the Government if they gave way any more would be extremely welcome'. In response, Churchill declared that he was going to 'give his Majesty's Government the support of a good hearty kick'.⁴² The Admiralty often viewed the Navy League in similar terms. For instance, in an Executive Committee meeting in late 1930, Commander Denny, the league's then general secretary, revealed that the Admiralty had informed him 'that they would like the Navy League very much to emphasise that the full amount of tonnage allotted under the Navy Treaty should be provided for'.⁴³ If the Admiralty was cautious to publicly align itself with the Navy League, it certainly valued the league's propagandistic work.

The Air League

Like the Navy League, the Air League was conscious of anti-war sentiment and its own militaristic appearance. Internal debates surrounding the league's aims and objectives following Groves's appointment as secretary general in 1927 are particularly revealing. Among his earliest initiatives, Groves proposed condensing the league's aims into three points: 'To secure a Home Defence Air Force equal to any other Air Force within striking distance of Great Britain, and the provision of adequate additional air force to meet the requirements of the Navy, the Army, and Imperial defence', 'To ensure the fullest development of British Civil and Commercial aviation' and 'To foster British interest in the encouragement of British Experiment and research in the Science of Aeronautics'.⁴⁴ While such aims closely resembled earlier calls for an air force 'capable of obtaining the mastery of the air', there was some opposition to the revised policy. For example, Sempill noted that 'objection had been raised to the first of these Aims as being militarist' and so a special meeting of the Executive Committee was called to discuss the matter.⁴⁵

At the meeting, Lieut. Colonel Mervyn O'Gorman, Executive Committee member, suggested that the wording of the league's first aim should be altered to read: 'To secure an *adequate* Home Defence Force in *relation* to any other air force, etc'. O'Gorman stated that while he entirely agreed that Britain should have an air force equal to any other within striking distance, many people felt the aim 'savoured of militarism'. By altering the wording, O'Gorman argued, the league could dispel any suggestion that it was 'too militarist' without fundamentally altering its programme.

Groves, however, rejected the proposal on the grounds that 'in view of the peculiar vulnerability of this country to aerial attack, "equality" was the minimum requirement for national safety'. Groves stated that the proposed alteration 'would modify a basic principle for which the League had always stood'. He then threatened to resign if the amendment was passed and so the motion was subsequently withdrawn.⁴⁶

Following Groves's tenure, the Air League's aims again became a feature of Executive Committee discussions. In late 1929, Dr Gerald Merton, the league's then chairman, stressed that 'less emphasis should be placed upon the military spirit now expressed in the first item of the "Aims" and that civil and commercial aviation should be given predominance'. He then suggested that the league should 'change its focus . . . and thereby add new members of [a] more pacific frame of mind'.⁴⁷ Merton felt that public confidence 'could not alone be gained by talking of bombs and battleships'.⁴⁸ Many on the Executive Committee shared such concerns. Yeats-Brown reflected that, given prevailing 'peace views', 'the military idea did not appeal to people', while Moore-Brabazon stated that the policy of the league had 'hitherto been too much inclined to tell people that they would be murdered in their beds. This no longer frightened them . . . peace is what appeals to the Englishman today'.⁴⁹

The Air League subsequently wrote more frequently on civil and commercial aviation, favoured the advertisement of civil, rather than military, aircraft in its publications and established plans for the creation of an International Civil Air Week. The published aims of the league also reflected this shift in emphasis. As outlined in *Air and Airways*, the league's revised objectives were to 'ensure the fullest development of British civil and commercial aviation' and to 'secure the maintenance of adequate air forces and of reserves for Empire and Home Defence'.⁵⁰ On air disarmament, meanwhile, the league's Executive Committee agreed in June 1930 that

It is not within the competence of the Air League to put forward, officially, disarmament schemes which are bound to be of a technical nature. It should, however, be the policy of the Air League to support the ideal of general disarmament . . . and to help towards a reasonable international agreement.⁵¹

Despite insisting that 'the nation's security is the first consideration of the League', its reluctance to engage with questions of disarmament due to a lack of technical expertise is somewhat curious.⁵² This is especially so considering that the league boasted among its members, at various points, aircraft engineers, manufacturers, aviation pioneers, leading air-power theorists and figures with experience at the highest levels of the

Air Ministry. As such, it was not long until divisions again arose over the league's policy.

Following further discussions regarding the league's aims and future work, Balfour and Yeats-Brown resigned in mid-1931. For Balfour, the league's policy was 'too pacific', while Yeats-Brown criticised the 'pacifist tendencies' of the league.⁵³ At the same meeting, the league dispensed of Thwaites as acting secretary general. Thwaites vacated the role, but not before informing the Executive Committee that the 'relegation of National Defence to the background' was a 'radical departure from the League's principles laid down over twenty years ago'.⁵⁴ Finally, later writing on his resignation from the Air League, Groves bemoaned the influence of the league's 'pacifist chairman' and stated that the league's shift in policy was merely 'calculated to save the face of officialdom'.⁵⁵

Organised militarism and the League of Nations Union

While an influential minority within the Navy and Air Leagues may have been willing to advocate disarmament and arms limitation, there was a much greater reluctance to associate with liberal internationalist organisations such as the LNU. Whatever the ultimate failure of the League of Nations as an instrument of collective security, the LNU was a major presence within the political culture of the interwar period, 'inspiring a rich and participatory culture of political protest, popular education and civic ritual'.⁵⁶ As such, it was important to both the Navy and Air Leagues that they actively challenged the union. Correspondingly, the LNU deemed it necessary to counter the propaganda of both the Navy and Air Leagues. Indeed, both leagues frequently came into conflict with the LNU's most senior leadership (chiefly Robert Cecil, Gilbert Murray, Philip Noel-Baker, David Davies and Norman Angell). While such disputes reveal much about the ways in which issues of disarmament, collective security and arms limitation played out in associational spheres, they also highlight the impact and influence of Navy and Air League propaganda.

Much of the reluctance to engage with the LNU resulted from misconceptions surrounding the union's apparent support for unilateral disarmament – despite its explicit and repeated denials to the contrary – and over the organisation's seemingly pacific nature. Cecil was acutely aware of this, later lamenting: 'Our opponents of the Right had got it into their minds that the League [of Nations Union] was just a piece of unpractical pacifism, while on the Left it was said by some extremists that we were war-mongers'. The union was charged with being both a 'piece of new-fangled pacifism' and 'too militarist'.⁵⁷ In 1932, Norman Angell – the

well-known writer, LNU member and one of the founders of the UDC – similarly queried how Lord Lloyd could accuse the LNU of ‘sentimental anti-militarism’ when the ‘commonest jibe flung by the anti-League press at the Union (and the League)’ was ‘the accusation of “militarism”’.⁵⁸

By the late 1920s, the Navy League was both a vocal opponent of disarmament and an ‘unrelenting detractor’ of the LNU.⁵⁹ Some within the league considered the union a ‘dangerous society’, while others spoke more caustically of the ‘bacillus of what we may call the spirit of the League of Nations Union’ which had ‘infected’ the British people.⁶⁰ Lord Lloyd suggested that the LNU comprised ‘many of the worst elements in our country; friends of those who refused to fight for their country in the War’ and that the union was ‘the avowed enemy of everything that could strengthen our national life’.⁶¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Navy League and the LNU clashed on a number of occasions – in the press, at public meetings and even in the form of radio debates between Lord Lloyd and Lord Cecil broadcast on the BBC.⁶²

The issue of disarmament was the most frequent area of contestation between the two leagues and the LNU. In a joint memorandum issued to *The Times* in February 1928, the Navy and Air Leagues objected to the policy of unilateral disarmament allegedly favoured by a number of ‘extremists’ within the LNU. The memorandum stated that the two leagues disagreed with ‘those who advocate one-sided disarmament’ and that any further reduction of armaments by Britain that was not matched by other nations would ‘not only jeopardize the security of this country and the Empire but will imperil world peace’. It concluded by warning that it would be a ‘real danger to the Empire if the influence of the extremists should become supreme in the League of Nations Union’.⁶³ Despite its tone, the piece had originally been written with a view to gaining LNU support for opposition to one-sided disarmament.⁶⁴ Cecil, however, was unwilling to advocate the memorandum. As he explained to Groves, the three organisations were ‘necessarily pursuing objects which are different though not necessarily contradictory. The two Service Leagues desire to maintain the Navy and Air Force at full strength for the present. The Union is aiming at the establishment of Peace by International Co-Operation.’ While Cecil claimed there was nothing ‘necessarily antagonistic between the two points of view’, a compromise was unlikely because the ‘two Leagues are essentially national in their outlook, the Union is primarily international’.⁶⁵ Displeased, Groves issued a further letter to *The Times* several months later in which he protested against the ‘unauthorized propaganda of these misguided extremists’ and called for the LNU’s General Council to publicly repudiate proposals for unilateral disarmament.⁶⁶ A letter to the same newspaper from John Hills, the

LNU's acting chairman, agreed with Groves that the LNU did not stand for unilateral disarmament, but argued that, as the union had already made this clear, it could do little more to distance itself from such a policy.⁶⁷

Despite the 'pacifist' nature of the LNU, and repeated assurances that it did not stand for unilateral disarmament, the Navy League made the same accusation several years later. It charged the union with trying to 'persuade themselves and everybody else in this country that the great thing that this country owes to mankind is to disarm as quickly as possible, whatever other nations may be doing'.⁶⁸ Even as late as 1936, Lily Yorke-Triscott, secretary of the Navy League's Kensington Branch, asked Cecil 'What protest has the League of Nations Union uttered' against unilateral disarmament 'which had reduced the Defence Forces of the Crown to their present condition?'⁶⁹ Internally, the Navy League expressed anxiety regarding the LNU on numerous occasions.⁷⁰ Publicly, however, the league suggested its own activities were 'instrumental' in countering the alleged 'long-continued endeavours' of the LNU and 'many other pacifist societies' to promote unilateral disarmament. It hoped that, as a result, the British public was beginning to see through the 'fog of pacifist propaganda'.⁷¹

In response to such pronouncements, *Headway* stressed that 'sections of opinion in the country might possibly wish the Union did advocate [unilateral disarmament]. But the hard fact is that it never does and never has.'⁷² To avoid any ambiguity, the journal printed the disclaimer: 'Disarmament, in any reference to the subject in HEADWAY, must be understood to mean the reduction and limitation of national armaments by international agreement'.⁷³ Key LNU figures were more explicitly critical of the Navy League. Angell described the league as 'scare-mongers', while Murray lambasted the 'blindness' of the Navy League's 'purely nationalist outlook', accusing it of not confining its 'propaganda within the limits of common sense'.⁷⁴ Noel-Baker likewise spoke of the 'Navy League mind' in parliament, while others were dismissive of the 'old Navy League point of view'.⁷⁵ Noel-Baker described such a mindset in the following terms: 'they never did believe in disarmament; they do not believe in it now'.⁷⁶

Much like the Navy League, many within the Air League staunchly opposed the LNU. This was particularly evident following Murray's suggestion that the Air League could prepare a proposal on international air disarmament for discussion with the LNU. Balfour was 'entirely against such a step', arguing that the Air League should not be 'allying itself with a definite body of pacifism and extreme radicalism'. Sir Charles Delme-Radcliffe 'distrusted and disliked' the union, while Sempill felt any association would 'undoubtedly alienate the sympathies of many

supporters'. Merton suggested that while there may have been some 'out-and-out pacifists' within the LNU, Murray had a more balanced view in relation to disarmament. Despite such assurances, Murray's proposal was not pursued.⁷⁷

The Peace Ballot of 1934 to 1935 provided a further point of potential tension between the Navy League, the Air League and the LNU. Despite covering arms limitation, the private manufacture of armaments and the abolition of aircraft by international agreement, the two leagues provided little public opposition. The Navy League labelled it 'misguided', reflected on the supposedly misleading nature of the questions contained within the ballot and agreed with the suggestion that it was little more than 'an attempt to obtain subscriptions by a fraudulent prospectus'.⁷⁸ As over a million people voted against the abolition of naval and military aircraft in the ballot, the Air League merely expressed its satisfaction that 'in spite of the blood-curdling prophecies regarding air warfare, many people still remember that war is older than aviation, and have not been deluded into the belief that the abolition of aircraft would bring peace on earth'.⁷⁹

Perhaps the greatest conflict between the Air League and the LNU arose over calls for the internationalisation of aviation and proposals for the formation of an IAPF. For many liberal internationalists, the modernity, transformative qualities and the 'inherently international nature of aviation' offered an opportunity to bring the world closer together – although only if 'freed from the shackles of the nation-state'.⁸⁰ There was widespread faith among figures on the left that aviation could be both 'civil and liberating' and hopes that aviation could serve as an important technology of communication and commerce, capable of abolishing frontiers and ensuring peace.⁸¹ Yet, despite the enthusiasm for modern science, technology and the transformative potential of flight, proposals for the international control of aviation prompted significant hostility in certain quarters as the chapter will later examine more closely. Indeed, as [Figure 2.1](#) demonstrates, the Air League was among those who dismissed such calls, pointing to the ways in which civil aeroplanes could be converted into makeshift or 'commercial bombers'.⁸²

'Insidious pacifist propaganda'

The Navy and Air League's attempts to counter disarmament and pacifism extended well beyond disputes with the LNU. For example, writing on the 1933 Oxford Union Debate – in which the Oxford Union carried the motion that 'this House will in no circumstances fight for its King



Figure 2.1 'And the result will be the same, whichever dropped it'

and Country' – *The Navy* described those present as 'young disloyalists yearning for notoriety . . . Mentally blinded by insidious pacifist propaganda these young men have failed to realise that no one is a worse enemy of peace than he who poses as a pacifist by profession.' Rather than achieving peace through pacifism, the league asserted that the 'only true way to avoid war is to have the will to peace and the strong arm ready and able to support that will'. The article concluded by again dismissing the resolution as 'disloyal', asking readers to instead remember the Oxford men who would 'rush to the defence of their King and Country with the same glorious spirit of loyalty and devotion that was shown by those gallant others of their kind in the year 1914'.⁸³ Others shared the Navy League's sentiments. Churchill described the motion as 'abject, squalid, shameless', while Lord Mottistone maintained, more than a decade later, that the debate was so injurious to Britain's national and imperial credibility that 'the young men at Oxford who passed that resolution very nearly decreed the downfall of Britain and her Empire'.⁸⁴

Alongside tensions with the LNU, the two leagues were critical of 'Pacifist dreamers', the 'screaming farce' of 'Communist Anti-War Demonstration[s]' and the 'slash-the-Navy Socialists'.⁸⁵ In turn, each league drew the ire of numerous pacifist, anti-war and left-leaning organisations. For example, in 1934 the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) resolved that 'in view of the fact that some of the speakers sent out by the Navy League have violated the principles of the Women's Institute by attacking the League of Nations and Pacifism' it would no longer invite Navy League lecturers to meetings.⁸⁶ Navy League propaganda seemingly had some impact in such circles. Following a speech by one Navy League speaker, the NFWI's Somerset Federation stated that while the 'word pacifist can be the noblest title, it can also signify an obstinate and foolish idealism which would call for one-sided disarmament and a refusal to fight when in danger'.⁸⁷ Lloyd met with Lady Denman, the institute's president, and later the NFWI's Executive Committee to discuss the matter, but, clearly unsatisfied, accused the NFWI of being a pacifist body.⁸⁸ In response, Denman wrote that while NFWI members could 'organize a meeting to advocate militarism or pacifism' as individuals or as members of other bodies, most members believed that 'to resist by force is morally wrong' and that to use a meeting to attack pacifism was an infringement on the NFWI's policy of avoiding any party political or sectarian ground.⁸⁹ The NFWI's Executive Committee further stressed that, although the Navy League might claim its work was of 'paramount importance to the nation', the NFWI was

'not formed to serve as the platform for propagandistic societies' and so would not allow the Navy League to use it as a vehicle for disseminating its message.⁹⁰ Denman's decision was much to the delight of the *Daily Herald*, who declared that although Lloyd 'is sometimes credited with having ambitions to be England's future Dictator', he could not 'palm the Big Navy bunk off on the women'.⁹¹

Support for, and affiliation with, the Navy and Air Leagues could prove contentious for certain politicians, with the Independent Labour Party (ILP) opposing both leagues.⁹² The ILP's Midland Divisional Council even considered an emergency resolution in 1928 calling for the expulsion of members of 'bellicose organisations' such as the Navy and Air Leagues from the Labour Party. Although there was opposition to the resolution, others felt that membership of either league was 'incompatible with the ideals and principles of the Labour movement'. As one member stated, if the ILP 'stood for anything it was peace'. The same member asked how effective any member of both a patriotic organisation and the ILP would be in 'going out to preach anti-militarism'.⁹³ Other institutions took a similar view. For example, the Derby Council for the Prevention of War recorded its 'strong protest' against J.H. Thomas, Labour MP and former secretary of state for colonies, for supporting the Air League. The council called for 'all citizens to refrain from supporting any organisation whose aims and objects include the increase of armaments'.⁹⁴

Beyond the political and associational level, newspapers such as the *Daily Herald* were also critical of the Navy and Air Leagues, dubbing the former a 'band of fanatics' over its Singapore Naval Base policy and later as 'warmongers'.⁹⁵ The same newspaper expressed opposition to the Navy League's disarmament policy in the early 1930s, stating that it was the 'job of responsible Ministers to keep the experts under control'.⁹⁶ Such criticism is important to note, especially as the *Daily Herald* was one of the most popular newspapers in the period and has been described as Labour's 'unofficial newspaper'.⁹⁷ Key individuals associated with both leagues were also subject to accusations of militarism on numerous occasions. Murray considered Lord Lloyd a 'fire-brand', while Harold Laski, the socialist intellectual, dubbed Lloyd a 'Supreme Autocrat'. Laski suggested that '[l]ife for him is a battle in which the big artillery is decisive . . . International peace, as Geneva views it, he looks upon as sentimental vapouring'.⁹⁸ Groves, meanwhile, saw fit to dispel claims that he was a 'militarist' and 'an apostle of force' in his publications, while the fact that J.A. Chamier was reportedly referred to as 'Bombmaster No. 1' in certain quarters did little to endear himself, or the Air League, to liberal internationalists.⁹⁹

The World Disarmament Conference, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Second London Naval Treaty

The World Disarmament Conference opened in Geneva on 2 February 1932 with representation from fifty-nine nations, including all major powers, to discuss the global reduction of armaments. The conference, long in the making after a Preparatory Commission had been established in 1925, met with millions of petitions from across the world expressing hopes for peace.¹⁰⁰ Yet, French demands for security and an international police force combined with German calls for military equality meant that proceedings soon stalled. After extensive deliberations, Germany withdrew from both the conference and the League of Nations in October 1933. The conference was formally adjourned in June 1934 before ultimately ending in failure. As a result, disarmament was ‘removed from the international agenda, and the major world powers embarked on an apparently inevitable process of rearmament’.¹⁰¹

The Air League

Questions regarding the Air League’s policy relating to the forthcoming World Disarmament Conference were initially raised by Alan Bott in July 1931. While Bott stressed that a definite policy was required, others on the Executive Committee were more reticent, stating that it was ‘difficult to formulate policies on specific questions such as “parity” until it was known what other nations were prepared to do’.¹⁰² Nevertheless, Bott maintained that it was ‘advisable to set up machinery to ascertain the views of experts in the many spheres of aviation’ so that the league could ‘formulate a definite policy and be ready to engage in opportune propaganda when the chance arose’.¹⁰³ While a sub-committee was formed to consider Bott’s proposals, the Executive Committee instead aligned itself with J.M. Kenworthy’s suggestion that the league ‘would be well-advised to abandon all further action [regarding the Disarmament Conference] as the subject was extremely complicated and one which was beyond the scope and capabilities of the League to deal with’.¹⁰⁴ Similar sentiments were echoed by Frederick Guest in his capacity as chairman. Addressing the Executive Committee, Guest asserted that, while ‘there was a section of the public that maintained that the Air League should follow the Navy League’s principle by pressing for increased armaments’, he thought that there was ‘no great

need' to pursue such a policy and that the 'greater part of the League's energies should be directed towards the development of civil and commercial aviation'.¹⁰⁵

At the Air League's AGM in July 1932, the Duke of Sutherland reflected that, while the league retained a 'strong position in the world of aviation', the World Disarmament Conference had undoubtedly curtailed the organisation's propagandistic work. Nevertheless, he warned that it would be necessary for the league to formulate a new policy regarding 'Military Aviation if the Disarmament Conference lasted many more months'. Conversely, Thwaites suggested that it was not the advent of the Disarmament Conference, but the league's 'decision to abandon its Military Policy' which had restricted its activities.¹⁰⁶

The league's state of inertia regarding the conference came to an end with the issuing of a memorandum, written in conjunction with the RAC and RAeS, to national newspapers and every MP in late 1932. The memorandum was published in response to a parliamentary debate in November 1932 in which Guest had pressed the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the coalition National Government, on 'whether it is clear that nothing in the line of the abolition of the Air Force can possibly take place without the permission of the House'. MacDonald's response that the 'Government must be free to negotiate the abolition or the extension of anything', but that any negotiations would be conducted with the understanding that 'final consent remains with this House', was clearly not enough to assuage the Air League.¹⁰⁷ In the memorandum, the league claimed that MacDonald had granted 'plenary powers' to the country's representatives at Geneva. It declared that 'Great Britain has for years past adopted an air policy which virtually amounts to universal disarmament. It has profited us nothing.' For the Air League, 'only the possession of adequate air forces can give us a reasonable measure of security at Home and Overseas and enable us to seek World Peace and ensure it'.¹⁰⁸

As leader of a coalition government, MacDonald placed great emphasis on 'consensus in policy-making based on the national interest'.¹⁰⁹ The Air League, therefore, provided at least some measure of popular opinion on which the Air Ministry could draw upon in challenging calls for the abolition of aerial bombing from a number of high-ranking officials in the Cabinet and Foreign Office.¹¹⁰ As further examined in [Chapter 4](#), the Air League advanced the Air Ministry's cause by vigorously lobbying for the RAF's continued role in maintaining imperial security. As the 1932 memorandum declared, aeroplanes 'judiciously employed in our Overseas Empire, have proved the most practicable means of preserving peace over large areas of the world's surface without an incalculable

expenditure of blood and treasure'. The league asserted that proposals for the abolition of military and naval aircraft and the internationalisation of civil aviation would not only 'endanger our national security in these islands' but would render impossible the 'discharge of our Imperial responsibilities'.¹¹¹

Such statements were timely, particularly as the Air Ministry's main justification in opposing proposals for the abolition of aerial bombing during the World Disarmament Conference was the RAF's role in policing the empire.¹¹² While it is difficult to measure the influence of the Air League's work in this regard, its opponents certainly felt the league had some influence. Noel-Baker bemoaned the league's opposition to the conference and disarmament at length in *The Private Manufacture of Armaments*.¹¹³ Similarly, in his statement to the Royal Commission on the Private Manufacture of and Trading in Arms, Noel-Baker noted that the activities of "'Patriotic" Societies' concerned with air power (the Air League being at the forefront of such organisations) were 'particularly intense' during the World Disarmament Conference.¹¹⁴ He asserted that the campaign of those with 'air interests' was a 'principal factor in defeating the success of proposals for Air Disarmament'.¹¹⁵ More broadly, while Patrick Kyba notes that 'organised anti-disarmament pressure group activity' was 'slight' at the time of Geneva, the Navy and Air Leagues were among the few organisations to protest the Conference.¹¹⁶

The Navy League

In his final address as Navy League president before being replaced by Lord Lloyd, Linlithgow warned that 'any extremes on the part of the League, any jingoism or any sign by which it might lead to the charge of being cranky, would deprive the League of its useful services'.¹¹⁷ Despite describing the LNU in similar terms, some within the league feared being labelled as 'unreasonable extremists'.¹¹⁸ On its propaganda surrounding the World Disarmament Conference, the league was also careful to stress that it did not make it 'a society in aid of militarism' and that the league's policy was not one of 'swank and swagger', but of self-preservation.¹¹⁹ Despite such fears, Noel-Baker reflected that the 'sinister support for the military-industrial complex had some importance [at the time of the World Disarmament Conference], since it created the illusion of public support for the militarist Ministers in the Government'.¹²⁰

Navy League pronouncements throughout the World Disarmament Conference did little to prevent accusations of jingoism or militarism. The league's New Year message in 1933, for instance, declared that the

nation could no longer be 'fettered and bound by treaties which denied us the right exercised since the days of the Saxon Kings to maintain the sea power that our special national conditions demand'.¹²¹ While the Air League was initially reluctant to comment on the World Disarmament Conference, the Navy League was far more vocal in its criticism. In *The Navy*, national newspapers and in letters to MPs, the league called for the navy to be built to the maximum level permitted by the London Naval Treaty which it stressed was necessary to safeguard the nation, its commerce, trade and communications.¹²² The league warned that the nation must

be careful lest the spirit of patriotism and self-sacrifice . . . be undermined by uninformed clamour, and lest we come to rely too far upon the security provided by paper pacts, which have often proved an illusion in the past and have even been the cause of war itself . . . Now, more than ever, the peace of the world can be maintained by the existence of an efficient British Fleet.¹²³

Ministers were keenly aware of the Navy League's influence. When Neville Chamberlain, then chancellor of the exchequer, proposed significant budgetary cuts for the Army and Royal Navy in favour of increased spending on the RAF at a Cabinet meeting in June 1934, Stanley Baldwin, then lord president of the council, warned of the potential response from the Navy League both in parliament and throughout the country.¹²⁴

Following the failure of the World Disarmament Conference and the government's 1935 Defence White Paper, the first in a series of annual defence policy reviews, the league claimed 'a large measure of credit for the fact that the Government has at last recognised "that adequate defences are still required for security and to enable the British Empire to play its full part in maintaining the peace of the world"'.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, it admitted that 'constant and ever-increasing effort' was required to ensure that 'our Defence Forces are without further delay put on a footing adequate to safeguard our Empire against potential dangers'. This was especially so following the revelation of the Luftwaffe and the public announcement of German rearmament.

The disclosure of Germany's naval and submarine programme in the spring of 1935 prompted particular alarm among some within the Navy League. Yet, Lloyd tempered demands for an acceleration of Britain's naval armaments.¹²⁶ *The Navy* was similarly reluctant to offer immediate comment following the Anglo-German Naval Agreement (which fixed the German navy to a tonnage ratio of 35 per cent the size of the Royal Navy).¹²⁷ Lloyd did, however, address the House of Lords, where he questioned the decision to accept the agreement, an infringement of the

terms laid out in the Treaty of Versailles, without consulting France or Italy, and stated that this 'was bound to be painful to our old Allies'. He concluded by stressing that 'Naval security was far more important than naval limitation . . . this agreement was enfeebling throughout and strengthening of all the forces which were bad to this country and the world'.¹²⁸ Despite Lloyd's criticism, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement – and subsequent London Naval Treaty – should not be interpreted as 'symptomatic of Britain's great power decline'. Instead, they prevented a 'naval race from breaking out before Britain was ready to win it'. Moreover, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement 'committed Germany to a long-term pattern of naval development that was, from the Admiralty's viewpoint, the least dangerous and disruptive' which tied 'the German navy to build a small, balanced fleet – one that the Royal Navy could easily contain'.¹²⁹

The Anglo-German Naval Agreement was followed shortly by the second London Naval Conference of 1935 to 1936. Convened on 9 December 1935 after extensive discussion, attendees included Britain, the US, France, Japan and Italy. At the conference, Japanese delegates asserted that the three leading naval powers (Britain, the US and Japan) should agree a common upper tonnage limit and that each should be free to distribute that tonnage between vessels of any size and class in relation to their respective strategic commitments. When no agreement was reached over Japanese demands for a common upper limit (parity), Japan withdrew from the conference.¹³⁰ Further discussions centred around qualitative limitations – principally gun calibres and the tonnage of certain vessels – rather than limitations on the overall size of fleets and was eventually signed by Britain, the US and France in March 1936.¹³¹ Not only was the treaty celebrated within the Admiralty as a 'diplomatic triumph that would ensure Britain's place as the world's greatest sea power', but it was followed with a 'huge burst of naval building' designed to deter Britain's rivals. Britain's 'great surge of warship building in the second half of the 1930s was', in many respects, 'an opening move in a burgeoning naval arms race'.¹³²

Nevertheless, fears of further naval limitations during the second London Naval Conference led to increased Navy League propaganda. The league warned that the 'time has come to stop this dangerous reduction of our Navy when other navies have increased and are increasing. Unless we act *now* it may be too late to recover our supremacy by which alone our peace and safety can be ensured.'¹³³ The league published widely in national newspapers, produced pamphlets and printed propaganda, and increased its lecturing campaign and public meetings.¹³⁴ To fund its work, the league received £10,000 from Lady Houston,

while Lloyd deemed the situation significant enough to consider accepting donations from armament firms – something which the league publicly opposed until this point.¹³⁵ Lloyd emphasised that the league's propaganda campaign should 'not embarrass our representatives at the Conference, nor draw the Navy League into unwise controversy', but stressed that it was necessary to increase 'public appreciation of our need for Naval Defence'.¹³⁶ Lloyd's warning did not prevent the league from publicly criticising the conference. For example, in its New Year message in 1936, it wrote that it 'seems certain that the Conference will end without any real advance towards the objective of disarmament'. The league lamented that through 'years of neglect, muddled idealism, and false economy, we have hazarded by default the glory and honour of our race'. For the Navy League, the lessons were clear: Britain 'must be free to build the ships we need'.¹³⁷

Despite such concerns, Rear-Admiral Henry Thursfield, Navy League member and naval correspondent for *The Times*, assured the league's Executive Committee in early 1936 that the Admiralty was 'alive' to the danger of further naval limitations and that 'no such situation was likely to arise'. Lloyd also stressed that, as the government was due to issue a second white paper on defence, the league should limit its propaganda until this had been published.¹³⁸ The government's Defence White Paper in March 1936, which emphasised the 'overwhelming importance of the Navy' for preserving sea communications to ensure the supply of food and raw materials as well as the passage of troops and supplies, clearly allayed the league's concerns.¹³⁹ Indeed, Lloyd suggested that the league's 'intensive and extensive propaganda' had 'some effect in rousing public opinion and encouraging the Government to take this action'.¹⁴⁰ In its annual report for 1936, the league stated that for 'many years upon the public platform, through the Press, by Parliamentary action and in many other ways' it had

constantly refuted the doctrine of peace by unilateral disarmament and of the virtue of weakness . . . These conclusions have now been accepted both by the Government and by the people at large, and it is not too much to claim that the work of the Navy League has been a principal factor in bringing about so satisfactory a change.¹⁴¹

While the Navy League was satisfied with the 1936 White Paper – and its own propagandistic work – it nevertheless stressed that there are 'still vital matters connected with our sea-power to which the public are not yet alive, nor even the Government', namely the Merchant Navy, youth and the influence of air-power propagandists as the following chapters will explore.¹⁴²

An international air police force and the internationalisation of civil aviation

Calls for the creation of an IAPF and the internationalisation of civil aviation received widespread support across the political spectrum from the early 1930s. This was especially so amidst global economic crisis, uncertainty surrounding the fate of international disarmament, the growth of European nationalism and increasing anxieties concerning the ‘shadow of the bomber’. As noted, there existed an enthusiasm among liberal internationalists for the potentially transformative aspects of aviation in relation to technology, modernity and the maintenance of peace.¹⁴³ Hopes for an IAPF in the British context are often explained through the enduring liberal belief in international law as a means of preventing war alongside fears of aerial bombardment.¹⁴⁴ For Waqar Zaidi, enthusiasm among liberal internationalists for aviation – and bombing in particular – was so great that it was much closer to militarist, than pacifist, streams of thought. As he suggests, ‘technological internationalism’ incorporated a ‘liberal militarism which put its faith in modern scientific weapons, seeing them as the ultimate arbiters of power and war’. Bombers, and later atomic weapons, were both ‘widely recognized and feared as weapons of mass destruction’ and ‘welcomed as potential instruments of peace’.¹⁴⁵

While the Air League was initially reluctant to engage with the World Disarmament Conference or questions on the internationalisation of aviation, this changed following J.A. Chamier’s appointment as secretary general in 1933. Issues surrounding the abolition of bombing, the international control of civil aviation and, in particular, the formation of an IAPF prompted extensive opposition from the Air League. While Chamier stated that the league supported the limitation of armaments, and that this was ‘desirable in the interests of peace and prosperity’, he asserted that it could not be at the expense of the security of the nation or the empire, urging ‘we should be inferior to no other power in the air’.¹⁴⁶

The idea of an IAPF had widespread support from leading internationalists including Angell, Davies and Noel-Baker.¹⁴⁷ One of the most influential proposals for an IAPF was that advanced by Noel-Baker in his contribution to the series of anti-war essays *Challenge to Death* (1934). He proposed the creation of ‘one single homogenous corps, recruited, organised, equipped, armed and paid by an international authority, the League of Nations, and owing allegiance to the League alone’.¹⁴⁸ Not only would an IAPF act as a deterrent to potential aggressors, but Noel-Baker argued that internationally controlled planes could, if an aggressor persisted in bombing civilians, ‘bombard his cities until

he stopped'.¹⁴⁹ Although Noel-Baker emphasised that it would be a 'desperate measure, undertaken in the last resort', this reflected an apparent inconsistency in the notion of an IAPF – that aggression could ultimately be halted in the form of reprisal bombings.¹⁵⁰ More broadly, proponents of an IAPF did not necessarily share the same vision: for some, such a force should be purely defensive in nature, while for others, the use of an IAPF might entail reprisals through the 'terrible power of the bomber to be effective'.¹⁵¹ While some deprecated the use of force, liberal internationalist calls for an IAPF did not eschew militarism but instead often represented a 'pacifist' interpretation of military aviation, if not a form of 'militarised internationalism'.¹⁵²

Beyond liberal internationalist proposals, schemes for an IAPF were introduced to parliament on several occasions, while leading figures from all the major parties supported the internationalisation of aviation at certain points. Clement Attlee, Labour Party leader from 1935, published on the subject of an IAPF, while Labour supported the abolition of all national air forces and the creation of an IAPF in its 1935 manifesto.¹⁵³ Stanley Baldwin, meanwhile, spoke favourably of 'the abolition of the air forces of the world and the international control of civil aviation'. Although the concept of an IAPF may well have been a panacea for many on the political left, it clearly transcended political boundaries.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, an IAPF was even supported by former Air League figures with links to the far right such as Moore-Brabazon and Thwaites.¹⁵⁵

Proposals for an IAPF were welcomed by a series of associational bodies and organisations throughout the 1930s. In 1932, David Davies founded the New Commonwealth Society (NCS) to advance such a cause. Among those later dismissed by E.H. Carr as a 'utopian' and 'idealist', Davies was a founding member of the LNU and one of the most persistent advocates of an IAPF.¹⁵⁶ Davies set out his views on the IAPF in *The Problem of the Twentieth Century* (1930), arguing that although 'in the course of time the chariots of air will play a decisive part in the service of the international authority', they were not yet in a position to do so.¹⁵⁷ However, as Brett Holman notes, the NCS published nearly exclusively on the concept of an IAPF.¹⁵⁸ The society suggested that an IAPF could apply military sanctions 'which can be exerted upon states for the purpose of maintaining peace'.¹⁵⁹ The NCS was not a mass-membership organisation, having reached only 1,772 members by 1936, yet its council contained a number of influential figures.¹⁶⁰ Most notably, Winston Churchill became president of the NCS in 1936. However, as Michael Pugh observes, there is little evidence to suggest he viewed his presidency as anything other than a 'rostrum on which to espouse war preparations'.¹⁶¹ Alongside the NCS, the Liberal-dominated, centrist Next Five Years Group similarly called

for the government to 'consider without prejudice' the formation of 'an international air force with the limited function of preventing misuse of civil aircraft'.¹⁶² Its founder, Clifford Allen, pacifist and leading ILP member, believed that 'aviation will either destroy or save our civilization'.¹⁶³ By 1935, the LNU also supported the idea of an IAPF after years of internal debate.¹⁶⁴

Being anti-war did not entail being consistently pacifist, anti-armament or anti-militarist. Indeed, in the late 1930s – albeit at a time when calls for collective security and disarmament no longer held much sway – the 'liberal conscience was militant rather than appeasing' and, by 1939, 'the liberal conscience endorsed a national struggle as a just war'.¹⁶⁵ For all the LNU's association with pacifism, British liberal internationalists 'were not pacifists, but willing upholders, with force if necessary, of a liberal international order'.¹⁶⁶ Militarism was able to cut across conventional dividing lines of party politics in the interwar years, much as it had done prior to the First World War.¹⁶⁷ As Edgerton argues, Britain developed a 'strategy of liberal militarism alongside its liberal internationalism'.¹⁶⁸ The IAPF concept, which for some 'savoured too much of militarism', provides a case in point.¹⁶⁹

Despite widespread support, calls for an IAPF and the internationalisation of aviation more generally were criticised by the Air Ministry, leading aviation periodicals and the Air League. The Air Ministry's position, advanced in the lawyer and air-power advocate J.M. Spaight's *An International Air Police* (1932), maintained that rather than ensuring peace through an IAPF and the internationalisation of aviation, a strong national air force consisting of heavy bombers would be the best guarantee of peace through deterrence.¹⁷⁰ *The Aeroplane* spoke more forcefully, stating that an IAPF was one of the 'most persistent heresies of the present day' and represented the 'folly of internationalism'.¹⁷¹ Such sentiments were echoed by the Air League, who regarded calls for the abolition of military aviation and an IAPF with 'grave concern'. The league declared that, if adopted, such measures 'would prejudice the country's safety without contributing anything to the progress of air disarmament'.¹⁷² For the Air League, an IAPF constituted little more than a 'fallacy' and 'would not be a police force at all, but a plain military force armed with weapons of immense power'. Furthermore, it suggested that, as the League of Nations could already employ military sanctions (under Article 16 of the Covenant which permitted the use of collective armed force against an aggressor in certain scenarios), an IAPF was also unnecessary.¹⁷³ David Davies responded to such statements directly, arguing that league failures – notably its inability to intervene in the Manchuria Crisis of 1931 – only served to highlight the weakness of the

threat of military sanctions, hence the need of deterrence through an IAPF.¹⁷⁴ The Air League remained unconvinced:

The League of Nations has a great role to play in the world but its paths must be the paths of peace. It is designed to be the conciliator, the arbitrator, the tactful friend, the originator of useful social international legislation . . . It is not right to set it up as a super State, armed against all comers: nor is it practical to do so.¹⁷⁵

In practical terms, the Air League stressed that even if an IAPF might act as a deterrent, it could not prevent a frontier from invasion, nor was such a force a weapon of defence or measure of security. Moreover, in using an IAPF as a tool of international arbitration, the Air League emphasised that any action taken against a potential aggressor could ‘result in the ruin of a whole people’.¹⁷⁶ An IAPF, and its capacity for aerial bombardment, meant putting the ‘most feared and hated means of warfare in the name of peace and the League of Nations’ and, as the Air League observed, it was ‘not for such bloody tasks that the League of Nations was formed’.¹⁷⁷ As Figure 2.2, produced in *Air Review*, indicates, an IAPF – and the militarised form of internationalism this entailed – was both impractical and incongruous with the purpose of the League of Nations.

In response, the Air League was again accused of being a ‘reactionary and militaristic organisation’. ‘Nothing’, *Air Review* stressed, ‘could be further from the truth’.¹⁷⁸ However, if the league wished to distance itself from such associations, the shift in tone towards an IAPF in late 1934 did little to assuage such criticism. As Chamier declared in November that year:

Recently a school of thought has arisen that seeks to persuade our people that the only answer is to take all potent weapons, and particularly the air weapon, away from the nations, and entrust the maintenance of the world’s security to a League of Nations Air Force, so strong as to be unchallengeable . . . Descriptions of this kind are misrepresentations based on misconception. When nations go to war the policeman is impotent: the resort must be to force, brutal and undisguised.¹⁷⁹

Alongside references to ‘brutal’ and ‘undisguised’ force, the Air League claimed that air control (the use of bombing aeroplanes on frontiers) was both ‘humane and effective’.¹⁸⁰ Unsurprisingly, this stance was questioned by figures such as Noel-Baker, who noted that the ‘bombing plane, which is “humane and effective” in the hands of a national State . . . becomes the “most feared and hated means of war”, when it is a question of enabling the League of Nations to check aggressive use of civil aircraft’.¹⁸¹ Accordingly, the league’s statements were dismissed by



Figure 2.2 'Join the International Air Force and bomb the world'

Noel-Baker as ‘not a serious contribution to the discussion of any problem of Disarmament, or even of national defence’.¹⁸²

Conclusion

The presence and popularity of internationalism, pacifism and anti-war sentiment in the interwar years – alongside calls for collective security and disarmament – posed myriad challenges for both the Navy and Air Leagues. In attempting to respond to such issues, the policies adopted by each organisation were, if only briefly, radically different from what had gone before. This reflected an endeavour to find a place in a society that certainly appeared inhospitable to certain elements of organised militarism. Fears of being labelled alarmists, scaremongers, jingoists and militarists were understandable concerns for both leagues. Yet, in gravitating towards more moderate policies, the character and ideological stance of each organisation appeared compromised. Ultimately, support for disarmament and shifts towards seemingly more pacific programmes were not long-standing features of either league’s work. After reverting to back to policies that advocated military strength, each league increasingly came into conflict with pacifist, anti-war and liberal internationalist streams of thought. Key LNU figures – despite their pacifist stance – all directly challenged Navy and Air League propaganda, as did many other anti-war and pacifist organisations. While it may have been the case that public confidence could not be gained by talking of ‘bombs and battle-ships’ alone, the apparent failures of collective security and disarmament as the 1930s progressed meant that both the Navy and Air Leagues once again focused on the promotion of military strength.

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 172. AL, AL Minute Book, AGM, 5 July 1933, 1–2.
 173. *Air Review*, March 1934, 17–18.
 174. *Air Review*, June 1934, 82–5.
 175. *Air Review*, June 1934, 87.
 176. *The Times*, 21 June 1934, 10.
 177. *Air Review*, November 1934, 15.

- 178. *Air Review*, October 1934, 14.
- 179. *Air Review*, November 1934, 14.
- 180. *Air Review*, April 1934, 11–12.
- 181. Noel-Baker, *Private Manufacture of Armaments*, 338.
- 182. Noel-Baker, *Private Manufacture of Armaments*, 339.

Chapter 3

Rearmament, the merchants of death and the preparation for war

Writing in January 1935, only months after the formal conclusion of the World Disarmament Conference, the Navy League reflected that Europe was ‘lying under the shadow of war clouds’ with ‘each nation living in a state of tension’. While the league desired peace, it stated that this could not be achieved by ‘international gestures, by apathy and defeatism . . . Peace comes to the strong and good will from strength. Peace will come only when our defences are sure and we are willing proudly to sustain them.’¹ Several months earlier, the Air League issued a similar message. As an article in *Air Review* declared, ‘England is still a country worth fighting for . . . A peaceful nation must be prepared to face times when for a while it may have to forego peace . . . The preparation must not be a half-hearted one.’ Continuing, the article suggested that the ‘beastliness, the brutality of war is easily sketched; it is hard to tell of its beauty, for the beauty of war is no tangible thing, but a fleeting glimpse which comes suddenly and is gone’.² Despite such statements, the political promotion of naval and aerial supremacy in the late 1930s by the two leagues was surprisingly measured and restrained. Neither called for unrestricted armaments and propaganda directed towards the state was significantly less hostile than it had once been. In part, this resulted from the increasingly symbiotic relationship between each organisation and the service departments. As later chapters demonstrate, each organisation relied upon the support of the Admiralty and Air Ministry to carry out work relating to military theatre and youth. Of course, Britain’s increasing programme of rearmament as the 1930s progressed did not mark the end of the Navy or Air League’s activities. The Navy League increasingly called for the deficiencies of the Merchant Navy

to be remedied, while the Air League focused on issues of civil defence and, in certain cases, the militarisation of civil society.

Nerve centres and the knock-out blow

If the interwar period was characterised by ‘doomsday scenarios of the next war’, then the Air League’s role in the creation of such scenarios warrants examination.³ This is especially so as the league proved particularly influential in the construction of the ‘knock-out blow’ theory. Much has been written about the shadow of the bomber in the interwar years and the anticipation of strategic bombing.⁴ This is unsurprising, especially given the extent to which apocalyptic warnings about the bomber featured in literature, films, newspaper columns and the pronouncements of military theorists and politicians – perhaps best encapsulated in Stanley Baldwin’s often-quoted ‘the bomber will always get through’ speech.⁵ Despite this, the Air League’s role in the construction – and promotion – of the knock-out blow theory has not received the same attention. However, the league frequently warned of ‘attack, sudden, terrific, devastating, conclusive, launched from the skies’ and that ‘a hostile attack by air could lay London in ruins and paralyse all the nerve centres of the country’.⁶ More broadly, there was certainly something of the Edwardian ‘cult of the expert’ in much of the league’s work, while the organisation boasted a strong intellectual base comprising a number of influential military theorists and technocrats.⁷ Notably, the author H.G. Wells and the journalist R.P. Hearne – some of the earliest theorists of strategic bombing – were among the Air League’s initial supporters.⁸

One of the first, and most influential, theories concerning the nation’s vulnerability to strategic bombing was that advanced by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu at a public meeting in early 1909. Although aviation was still in its infancy, Montagu cautioned that London lay open to strategic air attack. He spoke of ‘nerve centres’ (government buildings, the Houses of Parliament, railway stations, the stock exchange and so on) and the ‘paralysis which would result from a single well-directed blow . . . airships would come so swiftly, and strike so directly at the centres that the nation would be almost paralysed before armies or navies could come to her aid.’⁹ Montagu’s ‘nerve centre’ speech was highly influential, although fears surrounding the potential devastation caused by a ‘knock-out blow’ to both civilians and the urban environment only increased after 1918.¹⁰

Little more than a year after the armistice, Moore-Brabazon expressed such concerns to the House of Commons, warning that industrial centres would be the first object of an air attack in any future war and that

‘there is no defence against aircraft today . . . The only answer is to have a bigger Air Force so as to have the potential power of hitting back.’¹¹ Perhaps most significant in popularising the knock-out blow theory, however, was P.R.C. Groves. As part of a series of highly publicised letters to *The Times* starting in early 1922, Groves predicted that in future wars ‘each side will at once strike at the heart and nerve centres of its opponent . . . at those nerve ganglia of national *moral* – the great cities’. Groves argued that ‘owing to the development of aviation war has altered its character’ and that future conflict would take place across ‘areas’, not ‘fronts’. He bemoaned the size of Britain’s aircraft industry and stated that, if Britain’s air force remained small, only ‘death, damnation and disaster’ awaited.¹² Following Groves’s appointment, Air League literature increasingly emphasised that the country ‘if undefended in the air, is powerless’ and that ‘of all states in the world’ Britain was the ‘most vulnerable to aerial attack’.¹³ In popularising the knock-out blow theory, which by the 1930s had ‘almost become an orthodoxy, accepted and promoted by pacifists and militarists alike’, the Air League contributed to the strategic and eventual financial priority accorded to the RAF by ‘emphasizing the decisive role that an air force would play in future war’.¹⁴

‘Remember the power of the newest bombs’

Although the Air League did not want it to be thought that its ‘sole concern was with war and with military aviation’, its rhetoric was often suffused with ‘warlike overtones’ and it exerted considerable effort in shaping popular and parliamentary attitudes to the military potential of the aeroplane.¹⁵ This is important to highlight because, as Uri Bialer suggests, public opinion supposedly had a malign influence upon the ‘process of rearmament when not obstructing it altogether’.¹⁶ The Air League was responsible for considerable activity in the press and in parliament at crucial junctures in the history of the Air Ministry and the RAF. In the early 1920s, for instance, the league was a vocal advocate of maintaining the RAF as a separate service, with an independent Air Ministry. From late 1919, Winston Churchill held the position of secretary of state for war in tandem with the role of secretary of state for air. For many, this constituted a subordination of the Air Ministry to the War Office, even leading to the resignation of Seely as under-secretary of state for air.¹⁷ The Air League objected to Churchill’s position and worked closely with Seely following his resignation. Indeed, Seely felt that the league was ‘rendering invaluable service’ to British aviation and shortly thereafter became the organisation’s president.¹⁸

The league considered the issue of an independent Air Ministry as the 'most important question that could exist with regard to aviation' in the immediate post-war period, declaring that it was 'absolutely essential if we are not to be beaten in the race for air power'.¹⁹ Prior to the air estimates in 1920 – in which funds were allocated to the nation's air services – the league sent numerous telegrams to David Lloyd George, then prime minister, to advance the cause of an independent Air Ministry.²⁰ It also carried out propaganda in more public spheres, holding a well-publicised meeting at the Mansion House in June 1920. At the meeting, the league reaffirmed its aims and objectives and underlined the importance of developing civil and military aviation for the preservation of Britain's island status. Once again, the shadow of the bomber was a key theme. As the Conservative MP Lord Hugh Cecil stated, it 'was absolutely indispensable to the life of this country that we should not be exposed to a violent attack from the air'.²¹

Beyond its work relating to the maintenance of an independent Air Ministry, the league lobbied in parliamentary circles on numerous other occasions. For example, after the air estimates were introduced in the House of Commons in 1921, three of the principal critics in the ensuing debate were Seely, Joynson-Hicks and Edmund Bartley-Denniss – respectively president, a vice president and treasurer of the Air League.²² The Air League also supplied information to MPs for use in parliamentary debates on air estimates throughout the period and sent letters to MPs at all three general elections between 1922 and 1924, asking MPs and voters alike to remember that the question of the air was 'one that vitally concerns the safety of the Empire, and that a large and efficient Air Force based on a prosperous and highly organized system of civil aviation and a flourishing aircraft industry are indispensable'.²³ The league urged its members to lobby politicians on a local level, reminding them to 'see that your candidate promises to press for aerial development' and to 'remember the power of the newest bombs'.²⁴ It likewise asked its members to promote the importance of aviation in the 1929 general election and to pressure local candidates 'to demand an enquiry into the whole air situation'.²⁵

Following Groves's appointment, the Air League became even more vocal in its opposition to the perceived inadequacy of Britain's aerial position. For instance, in the first issue of *Air* in late 1927, Groves wrote that the public had been 'misled by the optimistic oratory of the past nine years, to believe that Britain is at least holding her own in the sphere of aviation'. 'Nothing', Groves continued, 'could be further from the truth'.²⁶ Groves published on subjects including air power and its application in modern warfare, air power in relation to Britain's navy, air debates in

parliament, the progress of civil aviation and a number of other topics. As the editor of *Air*, Groves was a 'fearless critic of the Government' and used the journal as a vehicle through which to bemoan Britain's aerial position and as a 'spearhead of attack upon apathy, inertia and official ineptitude'.²⁷

Upon his appointment, Groves informed the Air League's Executive Committee that he may have to take steps which would be considered 'inimical to the Air Ministry' and so it proved. It was not long until Groves attracted the Air Ministry's ire, with the latter contacting Sutherland directly to complain about Groves's writing.²⁸ Even leading aviation figures such as Moore-Brabazon considered Groves as an 'avowed enemy of the Air Ministry'.²⁹ Accordingly, when the Air League requested that Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) become its patron, Air Ministry officials raised concerns. In particular, Sir Hugh Trenchard, then chief of the Air Staff, stated

I feel very strongly that he should not touch it . . . the Air League has carried on a great campaign against Sir Samuel Hoare and myself . . . But apart from this, there are many frightfully controversial subjects connected with the League, and I think it would be very inadvisable for the Prince to accept, especially as it is supposed to be run on the same lines as the Navy League, and it does undertake a great deal of propaganda.³⁰

The Air League was subsequently notified that the prince had to 'abstain from personal association' owing to the league's propagandistic work.³¹ Nevertheless, this did not prevent the royal family from supporting the Air League in a number of activities as we shall see.

This was not the only occasion that the Air Ministry curtailed the Air League's work. When the Air League was invited to give three talks on aviation by the BBC in late 1927, the Air Ministry informed the BBC that the talks should not 'in any way advertise the Air League' and should 'deal only with civil aviation'.³² The talks were subsequently cancelled, with the BBC considering the Air League's aims to be 'controversial' and that the planned broadcast 'amounted to a serious attack upon the present policy of Air Defence'.³³ For the league, it was apparent that the BBC was 'under instructions to prevent anything that might savour of criticism of the Government or the Air Ministry'.³⁴

Despite such endeavours, the league's activities in parliamentary circles were limited for much of the late 1920s and early 1930s. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), this was a period in which the league underwent major structural changes. It had limited funds and no effective secretary general between Groves and Chamier, with Thwaites only serving as

acting secretary general (largely without the Executive Committee's confidence).³⁵ Furthermore, it was admitted internally that, as this had been a period 'when there had been no threat to British Aviation, either military or civil', the league 'had been forced into the difficult position of marking time'.³⁶ Following Chamier's appointment, it once again became influential in parliamentary spheres. As Chamier revealed to the league's Executive Committee at the beginning of his tenure, he had already established 'personal contacts with many of the friends of aviation in the House of Commons'.³⁷

To keep the issue of aviation at the forefront of parliamentary discussions, Air League members (and league associates) initiated two of the three parliamentary debates on air power which took place between November 1933 and July 1934. Significantly, these debates were opened only a month after the German withdrawal from the World Disarmament Conference – prior to the formal acknowledgment of German rearmament – and occurred at a time when calls for the internationalisation of civil aviation and the creation of an IAPF were widespread.

In November 1933, two debates on Britain's strength in the air were opened: one in the House of Lords by Sutherland (supported by Lord Lloyd) and the second in the House of Commons by Sueter. In the House of Lords, Sutherland expressed anxiety regarding the RAF's strength in relation to European powers and argued that Britain's frontiers had changed due to the development of air power. Sutherland declared that 'if London were destroyed, England would be destroyed. The heart and brain of the country would be destroyed.' He was careful to emphasise that he did not initiate the debate 'in any martial spirit', nor did he suggest Britain should 'rattle the sabre by advertising to the world our intention of increasing our forces in the air', yet opposition from Lord Arthur Ponsonby, a founding member of the UDC, and Lord Cecil suggests that Sutherland's fears of appearing militaristic were seemingly well founded. Nevertheless, Sutherland argued that a powerful air force, making Britain as impregnable as possible, would be one of the strongest arguments Britain could use in the 'peace councils of Europe'. He concluded that 'we should all work, hope, and pray that there would never be another war . . . but we should all see, if it did come, in spite of every human effort to the contrary, that we were not found hopelessly supine and apathetic'.³⁸

In the House of Commons, Sueter put forward a similar motion that 'this House views with grave disquiet the present inadequacy of the provision made for the air defence of these islands, the Empire overseas, and our Imperial communications', welcoming 'the need for a one-power standard in the air'.³⁹ Supported by the Air League stalwarts Moore-Brabazon and Guest, the motion was seconded by Balfour. Baldwin drew

the debate to a close, stating that Britain's inferiority in the air was due to a sincerity to secure disarmament which could only be achieved by a 'matter of will and not of armament'. Baldwin accepted the resolution, but asked for the tone of it to be altered. He felt that if it were passed, it would create the 'worst possible atmosphere' in Germany by suggesting Britain wanted to rearm as quickly as possible.⁴⁰ These simultaneous motions received widespread coverage and support from newspapers and aviation periodicals alike, while Sutherland suggested the debates 'proved of very considerable value in directing the attention of the public to the unsatisfactory state of British air power in comparison with England's neighbours'.⁴¹

In attempting to further influence parliamentary debates and cultivate political allies, the Air League had a number of representatives on the Parliamentary Air Committee (PAC). Sueter, considered an 'old friend of the Air League' by Sutherland, was the PAC's chairman, while numerous Air League figures – or individuals with strong links with the league – sat on the committee. The PAC was an effective pressure group, numbering around eighty MPs (predominantly Conservative and ex-servicemen) by 1934. The PAC often pursued similar aims to the Air League: it lobbied the government on the necessity of maintaining an independent air force, and thereafter a strong RAF, criticised plans for disarmament in the early 1930s and supported the retention of air bombing for police purposes.⁴² Alongside shared aims and objectives, the Air League also arranged events for the PAC, including visits to aerodromes and aeroplane manufacturers, while members of the Air League attended PAC meetings and formed part of a PAC deputation sent to lobby Andrew Bonar Law, then prime minister, on the importance of the RAF in the early 1920s.⁴³ As such, the committee provided a further rostrum from which Air League figures promoted aviation in parliamentary circles.

The Navy League and 'air protagonists'

While Air League members were among the key contributors to the knock-out blow theory, there was a greater reluctance within the Navy League to engage with issues deemed to be of a technical nature, despite the many naval authorities, former naval officers and senior Admiralty figures contained within its ranks. As Lloyd reflected, it had 'always been an unwritten rule of the Navy League that no part should be taken in controversial matters of technical detail connected with the ships of the Fleet'.⁴⁴ For Lloyd, this principle formed an important part of the league's relationship with the Admiralty. As he underlined in 1938:

our relations with the Admiralty have never been better . . . that is because we have steadily refused to take upon ourselves duties which are not within our competence to perform. It is not our duty to criticise the Admiralty on technical matters . . . Our job is to preach the sea services up and down the country.⁴⁵

He felt that while it was 'always the business of the Navy League to press for a strong Navy', it was 'seldom its duty to interfere in matters of detail'.⁴⁶ Although Lloyd previously stressed that it was 'necessary to avoid any tendency for the Navy League to become a mere appendage of the Admiralty', such pronouncements clearly highlight a desire within the league to avoid antagonising officialdom.⁴⁷

If the Navy League was reluctant to comment upon issues of a technical nature, then it was far more willing to discuss the Royal Navy in relation to air power. In the early 1930s, Navy League officials noted that while '[p]eople are going about the country saying we ought to be "air minded" . . . they ought to be "navy minded" first'.⁴⁸ By the mid-1930s, such concerns had intensified. In early 1936, Admiral Stephenson called for increased Navy League propaganda to counteract the 'grossly misleading and dangerous propaganda in favour of a supreme Air Force' which he felt was attempting to 'drive a wedge between the two services'.⁴⁹ Admiral Thursfield likewise criticised the 'extreme propaganda at present indulged in by some of the air protagonists' which he asserted 'was a menace and was seriously misleading the Public'. In combating such sentiments, however, Thursfield urged caution 'lest the impression be given that the Navy League was old fashioned and not alive to modern developments'.⁵⁰

Fears that the RAF was being built at the expense of the Royal Navy also featured at the league's GCMs. In 1936, the league's Chelsea Branch resolved that no increase in Britain's air forces could be considered as a substitute for a modernised fleet, yet Thursfield warned that there should be no antagonism between the two services and argued that they both had a common object: 'the security of the Country and of the Empire'.⁵¹ Such fears display a desire to avoid inter-service rivalry, but equally highlight an understanding that aviation – and the shadow of the bomber – perhaps had more hold upon public and parliamentary consciousness than naval threats. They are also interesting because, for the most part, the Navy League argued in favour of balanced armaments and was certainly alive to the importance of aviation for national defence. *The Navy* repeatedly downplayed inter-service rivalry, stating that 'the squabble between the two services, chiefly fomented by an air-minded press, should be encouraged to die'.⁵²

Such anxieties were shared at a more official level. As Chatfield, then first sea lord of the Admiralty, bemoaned, the navy had been 'suffering from the most virulent attacks for a long time' largely from 'air protagonists [and] protagonists of air firms who want to rise to power on the ruins of the Navy'.⁵³ Despite this, the Navy League emphasised that it had 'at all times stood for balanced armaments'. Expressing his satisfaction that Sir Cyril Newall, chief of the Air Staff from 1937 to 1940, was one of the principal speakers at its Nelson Day dinner in 1937, Lloyd re-affirmed the league's belief that co-operation between the services was a 'source of security'. Churchill, another key figure at the dinner, spoke with 'particular pleasure about the British Navy' and about the Navy League itself 'which has played so great a part in maintaining its strength and not only maintaining its strength when these matters are common property and everyone's sentiments, but in the years when so often defences are neglected'. Nevertheless, Churchill stressed that the 'Air Force are in the front line now' and that no 'advocate of the Navy, no champion of the Navy League would go so far as to say Naval Defence would be able to defend us alone'.⁵⁴

Despite concerns surrounding the activities of 'air protagonists', the Navy League worked closely with the Air League in certain endeavours, most notably in the production of the 'Navy League Sea and Air Map of the World', which displayed the world's sea and air routes.⁵⁵ Many Air League figures also valued the propagandistic work of their Navy League counterparts, even if the Air League often felt it was unable to share public platforms with the Navy League owing to a divergence of aims relating to national defence.⁵⁶ Philip Foster, Conservative MP and Air League chairman from 1918 to 1929, hoped that Air League members 'would help make the League what the Navy League had been . . . a great constructive force in our national affairs'.⁵⁷ Thwaites similarly argued that the 'teachings of the Navy League had informed the nation', while Moore-Brabazon felt that the Air League must do the 'same for aviation as the Navy League has done for the Navy'.⁵⁸

Attempting to further limit inter-service rivalry, the Navy League suggested to the Air League that it might combine into one organisation on several occasions.⁵⁹ Many on the Air League's Executive Committee were unreceptive to such suggestions, with calls for amalgamation in 1938 rejected by the Air League on the grounds that it had sufficient strength to retain its independence, however a letter did appear in *The Times* in July that year calling for closer co-operation to make 'the widest possible appeal'.⁶⁰ While there was seemingly little opposition from within the Admiralty, Air Ministry officials were less enthusiastic about such proposals. Newall informed Chamier that 'the Air League should not do

anything which would, by any conceivable means, tie its hands when propaganda for the Air Ministry and the Royal Air Force was required'.⁶¹ Figures formerly connected with the Air Ministry such as Trenchard, by this point a member of the Air League following his resignation as chief of the Air Staff, 'strongly deprecated' the proposal, while similar 'unofficial views' were expressed by members of the Air Council.⁶² Accordingly, both leagues remained independent.

The many air leagues

Beyond the Navy League, there were few organisations concerned with the political promotion of British naval power in the interwar years. Although the IML was influential prior to 1914, its significance had dramatically waned by the outbreak of the First World War. The IML wound up in April 1921, although not before approaching the Navy League with proposals for amalgamation. This was ultimately rejected, drawing an end to the divisive relationship between the two bodies.⁶³ The Society for Nautical Research – formed in 1910 to promote research into maritime history and 'raise an awareness of the Navy and the sea' – was distinct from the political work of the Navy League. Instead, the society was primarily interested in research and the preservation of the nation's naval heritage through initiatives including the restoration of HMS *Victory*, Admiral Horatio Nelson's flagship at the Battle of Trafalgar.⁶⁴

In contrast, there were a number of societies that cut across the Air League's work. Founded in January 1935 by Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*, the National League of Airmen (NLA) was the most notable of such organisations.⁶⁵ The NLA's principal aim was to 'make Britain air-minded and to make the rulers of Britain responsive to that air-mindedness', while it equally hoped that 'the condition of our aerial situation and development' would become 'a matter of discussion and knowledge in every home in the country'.⁶⁶ Captain Norman Macmillan served as president, with the organisation designed to be 'entirely directed by airmen. It must not be a hotch-potch of civilians with a few airmen who are unable to make their influence felt'.⁶⁷ As *Flight* pointed out, the work of the NLA was bound to clash with the Air League's activities and suggested 'a wastage of effort will arise'.⁶⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the latter also objected to the NLA.

The Air League initially considered approaching Rothermere to remove any misunderstanding between the two bodies, but Guest felt him to be 'an extremely difficult man with whom to discuss a matter of this kind'.⁶⁹ Instead, the league wrote an open letter to Rothermere, to

newspapers and to its members which stated that the aspirations of the NLA to create an air-minded nation was welcomed by the league, but it had a number of objections. It resented the NLA's reference to itself as "The Air League" as though the Air League of the British Empire did not exist', that 'by the use of "hotch-potch of civilians" you [the NLA] should have disparaged the constitution and efforts of other organisations than your own who are engaged in like work' and finally that the NLA gave the impression that it had 'a monopoly of anxiety for the safety and progress of our nation in air matters'.⁷⁰ Despite such tension, Rothermere ultimately considered the NLA to have achieved its aims: 'In awakening the country to its danger and the need for rearmament in the air, and in making politicians conscious of the rising tide of public opinion in these matters, the League did a wonderful work'.⁷¹ As a result, it ceased all activities in February 1938.⁷²

Beyond the Air League and NLA, aviators formed a disproportionate element of the membership of the BUF.⁷³ Mosley himself was a member of the RFC in the First World War – although only for several months after a crash brought his flying career to an end.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the BUF promoted aviation among youth and formed flying clubs, while its journal, *The Blackshirt*, often published articles on the importance of maintaining a strong air force.⁷⁵ Although the personal and financial links between the Air League and BUF have been noted, the BUF and Air League also shared a number of objectives – at least in relation to aviation.

A final organisation on the political right, the Hands Off Britain Air Defence League, is worthy of mention. This league was established in June 1934 by Oliver Locker-Lampson, the right-wing MP. At the league's inaugural meeting, which included speeches from Locker-Lampson, Sueter, Hannon and the Duchess of Atholl, Locker-Lampson called for a 'winged arm of long-range bombers, which would make the voice of England paramount again. Our prestige had sunk to zero. Once the British whisper reverberated around the world. To-day we might bellow in vain. For we lacked mastery in the air.' He stated it was 'unfair that because a politician was interested in the security of his country, he should be called a war-monger'.⁷⁶ While Hannon and Sueter had previously been Air League members, and although Locker-Lampson served on the PAC alongside Air League figures, there were seemingly few direct connections between the two organisations.⁷⁷ The Air League offered little in the way of public opposition to Locker-Lampson's league, although Chamier noted that while the Air League could not 'claim a monopoly of trying to awaken the country to the needs of aviation . . . it is rather a pity that a new organisation should spring into action'.⁷⁸ The most notable propaganda carried out by the Hands Off Britain Air

Defence League was the distribution of a pamphlet titled 'England Awake' which warned that 'London can be bombed, battered and broken within a few hours'.⁷⁹ Despite such concerns, the league was short-lived and appears to have ceased operations in 1934. However, the work of the NLA, the BUF and the Hands Off Britain Air Defence League ensured that the Air League was not alone in calling for increased armaments or in its opposition to liberal internationalist ideas on aviation.

The merchants of death

The private armament manufacturer (otherwise known as 'the merchant of death') was a long-standing – albeit contested – feature of the British warfare state.⁸⁰ Despite opposition prior to 1914 – perhaps most notably encapsulated in George Bernard Shaw's 1905 play *Major Barbara* – it was not until the early 1930s that the private manufacture of armaments experienced 'renewed and unprecedented levels of public criticism'.⁸¹ Beverley Nichols's *Cry Havoc!* (1933) was one of many publications to lament that 'in our midst were these vast corporations, trading in death, profiting by death, owing their very existence to death', while Fenner Brockway, the left-wing politician and anti-war campaigner, urged that '[m]ankind must either destroy the Bloody Traffic [the armament industry] or be destroyed by it'.⁸² Beyond the individual level, the LNU's Peace Ballot asked the British public 'Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement?', with 90 per cent of participants answering 'yes'.⁸³ The UDC similarly called for the government to abandon 'their unholy alliance with the vested interest in arms'.⁸⁴ More broadly, the Labour Party was a persistent critic of armament manufacturers, while on an international level the League of Nations shared such sentiments.⁸⁵

Such pressure eventually led to the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Private Manufacture of and Trading in Arms – an official inquiry into the armaments industry which sat for twenty-two public sessions between 1935 and 1936.⁸⁶ A vast quantity of evidence on the arms industry was generated by the commission which was supplemented by Noel-Baker's publication of *The Private Manufacture of Armaments* in late 1936. While the Royal Commission may have suggested that the 'tide of popular feeling was [now] running fiercely against private manufacture' of arms, it failed to propose any concrete action against such manufacturers.⁸⁷ However, the commission, and later Noel-Baker, revealed the numerous ways in which armament firms used 'patriotic' societies such as the Navy and Air Leagues as instruments of propaganda.⁸⁸

When Groves was appointed to the Air League as secretary general, Frederick Handley Page offered the Air League an annual sum of £5,000 for two years on the condition that Groves was appointed with a free hand. Founder of the aircraft manufacturing company Handley Page Limited, Handley Page stressed that the offer was made 'entirely without condition as to the future policy of the Air League' and that the league 'would be free to settle its own affairs in its own way without dictation from any political body, trade interest or otherwise'.⁸⁹ Although some within the league were concerned that associations with aircraft manufacturers might hamper its independence, the league's Executive Committee accepted the offer. It was undoubtedly Sir Edmund Bartley-Denniss, the sole dissident regarding the offer and a figure who had previously considered the league's links with manufacturers as potentially 'disastrous, not only to the League but to the country', who leaked the story to *The Times*.⁹⁰ After the newspaper published proceedings of the league's meeting the following day, the offer was withdrawn. As Handley Page stated, the 'worst possible effect was being created by the suggestion that General Groves was the nominee of some body outside the Air League, and that the offer was made on behalf of those interested in production'.⁹¹

Despite repeated assurances that the Air League was not 'pleading for the interest of aeroplane constructors', one of its publicly stated aims was 'the establishment of a thriving aircraft industry'.⁹² Unsurprisingly, this drew the attention of figures on the political left. Clement Attlee, for example, reflected upon the league's links with armament firms in the House of Commons in 1926. This was much to the league's annoyance: 'The suggestion conveyed in Major Attlee's remarks that the Air League is a sinister organization, created to develop markets for some of our armament firms, is wholly incorrect.' The league argued that 'the names of well-known men, some of whom may be possibly interested directly or indirectly in aviation, from a manufacturing point of view, appear in the list of personnel of the League is only natural'.⁹³ Also natural, perhaps, was that manufacturers were among the friends of many Air League figures.⁹⁴

As well as being among its personnel, aeroplane manufacturers were actively contacted by the Air League in the hope that they would contribute articles to its official organ (before the league later reversed the decision).⁹⁵ Manufacturers did, however, occasionally attend Executive Committee meetings, the league's public gatherings and social events.⁹⁶ In January 1926, in response to Hoare's announcement that the Air Ministry intended to slow down the rate of RAF production, the Air League held a luncheon to protest the decision. One of the key speakers was C.R. Fairey, founder of the Fairey Aviation Company and former chairman of the

Society of British Aircraft Constructors (SBAC). Fairey was conscious of speaking from a position of vested interest, noting that ‘when an aircraft manufacturer expresses any opinion on the subject of aerial defence, he lays himself open to the charge that the aircraft industry are very interested parties’. Nonetheless, he used the platform to criticise Hoare’s decision.⁹⁷

This was not the end of the Air League’s links with aircraft or armament manufacturers. Perhaps most remarkably, the league invited Sir Basil Zaharoff, the arms dealer and archetypal ‘merchant of death’, to join it on public platforms and to become an honorary vice president in the early 1920s.⁹⁸ Banquets were also hosted by the Air League for aircraft manufacturers such as A.V. Roe, while Roe paid an annual membership subscription to the league.⁹⁹ A number of manufacturers (Fairey, Rolls-Royce, Saunders-Roe, Armstrong-Whitworth and the Gloster Aircraft Company) supported the Air League by allowing visitors to attend their factories on Empire Air Day (fully explored in [Chapter 7](#)), with eminent manufacturers such as Geoffrey de Havilland and A.V. Roe contributing to Empire Air Day programmes.¹⁰⁰ Programmes on Empire Air Day were similarly replete with adverts for aircraft manufacturers.¹⁰¹ Armament manufacturers also contributed to the league’s educational activities: the ADCC attended lectures at the factories of aeroplane manufacturers, while the league arranged tours of such sites for Boy Scouts. Vickers also donated to the ADCC and loaned the Air League material for its lectures at universities.¹⁰²

Beyond supporting the league on Empire Air Day and in relation to its educational programme, adverts for aircraft manufacturers frequently appeared in *Air Review*, while the league received direct financial support from manufacturers such as Vickers-Armstrong and Imperial Chemical Industries (as well as unofficially approaching Fairey when struggling for funds in the early 1930s).¹⁰³ Furthermore, the league organised a trip for thirty MPs to visit the Bristol Aeroplane Company in 1934, only weeks before the announcement of plans for RAF expansion, to tour its factory.¹⁰⁴

In addition to financial contributions, there were occasions where private manufacturers seemingly directed Air League policy (as in the case of Groves’s appointment) or at least heavily influenced it. For example, Sir John Siddeley, director of Armstrong Siddeley, approached Lindsay Everard during the World Disarmament Conference with ‘the suggestion that the Air League might take action to safeguard British air interests’.¹⁰⁵ The action taken was the appointment (with a contribution from Siddeley towards his salary) of Chamier as secretary general. It is also worth noting that Chamier served on the board of the Vickers-Supermarine group as a

technical director before his appointment at the Air League.¹⁰⁶ Sir Henry White-Smith, the league's honorary treasurer in the late 1920s, similarly had strong ties to the aircraft industry.¹⁰⁷ Chamier and White-Smith were not the only figures with links to the aircraft industry to sit on the league's Executive Committee, although the presence of such figures was not without opposition. Included in the Air League's restructuring in 1932, therefore, was the principle that no one actively associated with any aircraft manufacturer should have a seat on the Executive Committee. Accordingly, Sir Harry Brittain, Sir Alan Cobham, Sempill and Gordon England (all of whom had strong connections to the aircraft industry) were asked to resign.¹⁰⁸

Such links were mentioned in the Royal Commission's report, which raised concerns that organisations such as the Air League were being 'used by the armament firms as a means of exerting indirect influence in favour of increased national armaments', and in Noel-Baker's subsequent book.¹⁰⁹ Noel-Baker particularly focused on Handley Page's offer: 'In plain English, £10,000 was offered to the League to help it to create opinion in favour of increased armaments in the air'.¹¹⁰ In his evidence to the Royal Commission, Noel-Baker stated that the Air League should publicise its membership, subscribers and lists of donors and 'ought not to have any connection with the industry by which . . . armed forces are to be produced'.¹¹¹ Given that there were a 'number of generous donations' from unnamed sources and a 'generous offer of financial assistance' from 'certain aeronautical organisations and their friends' to the Air League, it is little wonder that Noel-Baker suggested that such connections 'will lead many people to deduce that there are at least some Manufacturers among those who so opportunely helped the League to save the day against "the common enemy Disarmament"'.¹¹²

Financial links between the Air League and manufacturers were also touched upon by others. Fenner Brockway and the journalist Frederic Mullally later suggested that such connections explained why the Air League so 'assiduously pursued the "aim"' of establishing a "thriving aircraft industry".¹¹³ The historian Alfred Vagts further noted that bodies such as the Air League were 'heavily subsidized by industrial money' and that the league was among those who represented 'little more than screens for the promotion of interested air-mindedness'.¹¹⁴ However, given the often parlous financial condition of both the Air and Navy Leagues in the interwar years, and the fact that both declined subscriptions from armament manufacturers on occasion, financial links should not be overstated. While it may not be the case that either organisation was solely 'moved by patriotism freed from politics', neither league simply acted as a mouthpiece for armament firms.¹¹⁵

Like the Air League, the Navy League was conscious of both financial and political associations with the armament industry. When a scheme was placed before the league that relied upon shipbuilding, steel and armament firms to support its educational and lecturing work, this was rejected.¹¹⁶ Similarly, in his report to the Royal Commission, Sir Charles Craven, chairman and managing director of Vickers, revealed that Vickers-Armstrong offered subscriptions to the Navy League (and to the Air League) but that they were refused.¹¹⁷ As Lloyd explained, it 'was imperative that no accusation that the League was supported by Armament Firms could be made with any justification'. G.O. Stephenson, then general secretary, similarly emphasised that if the league 'accepted subscriptions from armament firms, they would not feel themselves entirely free to form whatever opinion they might wish. They might be accused of having their policy dictated to them.'¹¹⁸ However, in a later Executive Committee meeting, Lloyd discovered that the league had, in fact, been receiving funds from Vickers (alongside donations from Craven himself). Unaware of this, Lloyd was furious and stated that 'in the full course of his career, he had never before been so badly let down as he had been in this instance'. In the same meeting, the league resolved to return a cheque for £100 to Imperial Chemical Industries due to the company's production of armaments.¹¹⁹

While the Navy League hoped to avoid the controversy surrounding Handley Page's financial offer to the Air League, this did not stop it accepting contributions from Vickers to the SCC (or from contacting firms in the shipping industry for financial support for the corps). Lloyd also approached Sir Charles Craven for donations to the SCC, despite the league's earlier refusal of subscriptions, yet there appears to have been no hostility towards these contributions.¹²⁰ Similarly, there was little opposition to Vickers's offer to the Navy League of lantern slides for lecturing purposes, to the financial contributions made by aeroplane manufacturers and others within the aviation industry to the Navy League or to the inclusion of advertisements for armament manufacturers in *The Navy*.¹²¹ Alongside financial links, Lord Sydenham served on the board of Armstrong Whitworth, Patrick Hannon became a director of the Birmingham Small Arms company following his time with the Navy League in 1925, while Leo Amery was appointed as a director of the naval manufacturers Cammell Laird & Company in 1933.¹²² Despite such connections, the involvement of armament manufacturers in the institutional elements of the league appear to have been far less extensive than with the Air League. Of course, in lobbying for naval power and 'the ships and guns which the Private Firms produce', the league provided 'free publicity of a particularly powerful kind'.¹²³

Although private manufacturers may not have dictated the policy of the Navy and Air Leagues, they certainly saw the propagandistic value of each organisation. Links of personnel, funding and objectives – especially in the Air League’s case – were extensive and influential. As Noel-Baker suggested, if the Air League ‘could claim with justice, as I believe it could, that it had “done much” by its “strong campaign” to bring a great increase in Air Armaments, it had done so in large part with money supplied by those who had a vested interest in making the aircraft for which it pressed’.¹²⁴ Beyond their bearing on league policy, associations with the ‘merchants of death’ did little to help either organisation distance itself from accusations of militarism.

The Air League, rearmament and defence from the air

Speaking at the Air League’s AGM in 1934, Sutherland lamented that Britain’s air force was ‘pitiably below strength’ and argued that

no reasonable person could really look forward with pleasure to our entry on a race in air armaments with other countries but no sane citizen could look with equanimity on our present position. There must be a speeding up immediately of the defence forces of this country . . . we had to get, by agreement or otherwise, an Air Force second to none in the world.¹²⁵

While the Air League may have been successful in awakening politicians and the public to the potential threat of the aeroplane, it remained unsatisfied with Britain’s aerial position. The league expressed ‘bitter disappointment’ over the 1934 air estimates, particularly the accompanying memorandum issued by Lord Londonderry, secretary of state for air, which described a ‘widening gap between the present strengths of the Royal Air Force and of the Air services of other great powers’.¹²⁶

Nevertheless, following the introduction of Scheme A – the first major expansion of the RAF since 1923 – and Baldwin’s statement that ‘since the day of the air, the old frontiers are gone. When you think of the defence of England, you no longer think of the White Cliffs of Dover; you think of the Rhine’, the Air League was less critical of both the state and the Air Ministry.¹²⁷ After the formal acknowledgement that Britain was pursuing parity with anyone within striking distance of its shores, *Air Review* wrote that ‘it is a good start and a courageous one. A Government still hoping for some agreement on the limitation of armaments, and beset by the apostles of internationalism, can do no more.’¹²⁸

The announcement of German rearmament did little to alter the league's outlook. 'The great lesson to be drawn', *Air Review* stated, is that 'any nation, though bound by Treaty and under constant surveillance by suspicious neighbours, can arm secretly if it intends to. The abolition of national military air forces would lead directly to this danger; the internationalisation of military or civil aviation can do nothing to remove it.'¹²⁹ The Air League's opposition to the internationalisation of aviation and the creation of an IAPF was seemingly vindicated. According to the league, Britain had 'listened too long to theorists and internationalists' and the lessons were clear: 'We must have an Air Force for the defence of this country equal at least to that of any other power within reach of our shores, and we must have it quickly'.¹³⁰

While some criticised the 1935 air estimates, the Air League suggested that an 'ordered progress – a steady strengthening of foundations to carry a solid structure – is preferable to spectacular spending that might only erect a flimsy façade'. It noted that the RAF was suffering from 'sixteen years of neglect' which 'cannot be remedied in one year's Estimates'.¹³¹ Sutherland did, however, stress that 'we must increase the Royal Air Force – and increase it rapidly – if we are to get out of a most dangerous situation'. He felt that it was, to some extent, due to the Air League's 'constant propaganda that we have obtained real public recognition of the position, so that our sober and peace-loving peoples realise that we can no longer take the risk of inferiority in the air'.¹³²

The Air League was equally vocal on issues of civil defence. In the process, it was particularly critical of the apparent wisdom of Baldwin's 'the bomber will always get through' speech, suggesting that 'we can confidently assert that the bombing of women and children, or bombing in reprisal of attacks on women and children, is the most foolish form of utilising air power which it is possible to conceive'. The league objected to the way in which the term 'reprisals' was used in reference to air power and dismissed suggestions that it was impossible to defend against aerial bombardment. It suggested that a more likely (or more efficient) scenario than the bombing of women and children would be that bombardment would be directed against a nation's Achilles heel, stressing 'only in the case of the most feeble-minded people would direct attack on the morale of the civil population come under this heading'. The best form of defence, so the league argued, was to attack the 'air establishments of the enemy [which] will serve to diminish very greatly the scale of attack which can be brought to bear on us'.¹³³

The revelation of German rearmament led the league to reflect upon the potential form of any future conflict in similar terms. An article in *Air Review* asked its readers: 'Which strategy is likely to triumph? – one that

uses air power to choke docks with sunken ships, stop the production of munitions, and to attack the enemy air establishments? Or the one that attacks women and children and civilians in their homes?' The journal declared: 'Let us stop this constant cry of havoc . . . The sooner our possible enemies realise that we are not to be scared into surrender by the bombing of civilians the less likely are we to suffer from such attacks.'¹³⁴

While such comments suggest an increasing scepticism towards the knock-out blow theory, they also point to the league's growing concern with civil defence. In light of increasing international tension, the Air League called for the country to 'put our backs into defence as much as into counter attack', with Chamier warning that, in future conflict, mustard gas could be 'dropped like rain from the skies'.¹³⁵ Sutherland likewise urged in July 1935, the same month as the first Air Raid Precautions (ARP) circular was issued by the Home Office, that a 'big drive should be made for air defence'. He felt that the question of defence had not been properly tackled and was of the opinion that 'the country could be given a great measure of security against air attack'.¹³⁶ He further emphasised that 'too much stress should not be given to the counter attack which was a poor consolation to the individual citizen' and that anti-aircraft gunnery, searchlight and sound locator operations and other forms of defence should be promoted.¹³⁷ Air defence, although not as prominent as the counter offensive, was also part of Air League pronouncements surrounding the threat of the bomber in light of events beyond Europe. Writing on the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the league did not believe that

anything like sufficient attention has been given to this problem of defence – a defence which must involve every art which science can bring to our aid: aeroplanes, guns, searchlights, balloon aprons, aerial mine fields, camouflage, air defence training for civil population. Everything which can lessen casualties and prevent panic must have our urgent and earnest attention.¹³⁸

While the league hoped that events would not develop into a 'European catastrophe', it felt that Abyssinia underscored the importance of strengthening Britain's air force, while emphasising the vulnerability of civilians to aerial warfare.¹³⁹

Beyond such pronouncements, Chamier revealed to the league's Executive Committee in June 1937 that he had received 'highly confidential proposals' for the Air League to organise a 'National Air Defence Exhibition' at Olympia.¹⁴⁰ The exhibition did not materialise, yet proposals for an exhibition on air defence, only months after the German bombing of Guernica, suggest that civil defence and the preparation for conflict

were becoming increasingly pressing. Relatedly, the Air League was approached in March 1938, only weeks before the German annexation of Austria, with a scheme for the evacuation of schoolchildren from large towns to specially built schools in the country in the event of war.¹⁴¹ Chamier himself was closely involved in national defence schemes. In July 1938, he was appointed secretary of the Air Ministry's Civil Air Guard, an organisation that aimed to provide a body of men and women between the ages of eighteen to fifty 'with a knowledge of flying to assist in time of emergency the Royal Air Force or in any other direction concerned with aviation for which their services might be required'.¹⁴² While civil in character, it was admitted that the Civil Air Guard's 'eventual utility to the Royal Air Force, if war should ever come, was its main purpose'.¹⁴³

Of course, events on the international stage made the threat of aerial bombardment more tangible. Following the Munich Conference in September 1938, the league declared that 'whether we are fighting to achieve peace with honour or struggling to maintain the peace secured to us by statesmanship, our efforts in our own defence must be intensified'. It argued that '[w]e must pay no heed to those who, drawing false lessons from the Spanish or Japanese wars, say that aeroplanes are inconclusive' and warned that '[w]hen aeroplanes are skilfully used on a large scale they can destroy the sinews of war by striking ammunition works, factories and communications. Weakness in our air defence organisation might lead to our defeat'.¹⁴⁴ The league also called for more active, and radical, defence measures. It noted that most ARP schemes aimed at getting the majority of the population in underground air-raid shelters, with the defence of the country left to those in the services. In contrast, the league asserted that there was room for more active civilian participation. It suggested that civilians could lay smoke screens in the event of an air raid and that it was feasible to arm 'civilian "soldiers"' with light machine guns to combat low flying aeroplanes, asking: 'Is it so hard to train a man to fire with some accuracy against low flying aircraft? Would not the volume of fire make up to some extent for any inaccuracy?'¹⁴⁵ The militarisation of civil society was a theme of further articles in *Air Review* in 1939. The league stressed that if Britons were to be forced underground, 'into holes like rabbits', and industry, commerce and communications were disrupted, then 'utter chaos' would ensue and any war would be lost. It stated that it was 'on active defence that we must concentrate. If we can shoot down the enemy, or ward off his attack, the losses which will be inflicted upon our people will diminish'.¹⁴⁶ Clearly, the Air League felt civilians had an active role to play in conflict.

The Navy League, the Merchant Navy and the preparation for war

Following the second London Naval Conference in 1936, the Navy League felt that 'the need for extensive and intensive lecturing had for the time being ceased' and that its propagandistic work 'should be devoted to other channels, particularly in regard to the Merchant Navy, and an extension of the Sea Cadet Corps'.¹⁴⁷ At its GCM the following year, Lloyd noted that 'after ten or fifteen years of persistent preaching, it has come home to the people of this country and to their leaders how manifest is the impossibility of achieving any success in foreign policy . . . without adequate force behind it'. He felt that the Navy League had done its duty and that it could feel gratified at its role in bringing about rearmament. Yet, the extent to which the league directly influenced Cabinet policy was made clear by Lloyd himself: 'Our main task has been to provide public opinion throughout the country and although we can claim some measure of success in this connection, we cannot claim to have influenced the counsels of the Cabinet; no voluntary organisation can expect to do that'. Despite this, Lloyd was satisfied that the league's 'persistent propaganda against apathy and emotional pacifism has been largely instrumental in giving to the Government that united support for armaments which it has got now'.¹⁴⁸ Such sentiments were not confined to the Navy League. Commenting upon Britain's increasing rearmament programme, one official from the Defence Requirements Committee reflected upon the 'extraordinary' effect of public opinion, the press and the 'Lord Lloyd-Churchill group on the minds of the ministers'.¹⁴⁹

While the Navy League was increasingly content with the preparedness of the Royal Navy by the late 1930s, the same could not be said for the Merchant Navy. As Lloyd declared in late 1936, the league was determined to make 'the people of this country understand the terrible and dire effect which a depleted Mercantile Marine must have on the whole of the Empire'.¹⁵⁰ In attempting to disseminate its message, the league engaged in an extensive programme of political lobbying that included lecture tours, letters to the press, public meetings and pronouncements in the House of Commons and House of Lords. Navy League literature and local branches also increasingly lobbied for improvements in Britain's Merchant Navy. As the league's Edinburgh Branch argued, one of Britain's most 'urgent naval needs to-day was the provision of an adequate Reserve, properly trained and fully equipped in the strategy of defensive warfare . . . A shortage of seamen and ships in our Merchant Navy might prove disastrous in war'.¹⁵¹ Beyond these visible, public methods of dissemination,

the league used more informal channels. In July 1936, for instance, Lloyd formed part of a secret deputation that met with Stanley Baldwin to express its concern regarding the nation's shipping industry.¹⁵²

For the Navy League, naval supremacy rested not only upon a powerful Royal Navy, but also on a vibrant shipping industry and a large Merchant Navy with the capability to carry out trade, supply Britain's food and provide a reserve of manpower. A powerful Merchant Navy was also important for British prestige. In early 1938, the league objected to the 'scandal' resulting from the ease with which registration to the Merchant Navy and consequent protection of the British flag could be obtained by foreign vessels. Lloyd contacted Neville Chamberlain directly, receiving a response noting that no further temporary registration would be granted by British Consuls without reference to the Board of Trade and that a number of provisionally registered British ships had reverted to their foreign registration.¹⁵³ The league additionally considered pressing for the appointment of a Minister of Marine, although felt it could not be pursued owing to the political pressure it would involve.¹⁵⁴ However, this did not prevent further propaganda on behalf of the Merchant Navy. In attempting to increase its influence in this sphere, the league appointed representatives of the Merchant Navy to serve on its Executive Committee, while Lloyd stated that, just as every Admiral of the Fleet was a Navy League vice president and supporter, 'so we desire that the Chairman and Directors of every Shipping Company and Shipbuilding Company shall join our ranks'.¹⁵⁵

Alongside the Navy League's extensive public programme, Lloyd was a constant champion of the Merchant Navy in the House of Lords. Drawing attention to the decline of British shipping in the Pacific in June 1936, he declared that if the Merchant Navy – 'its men as well as its ships' – was 'ineffective or enfeebled', it could herald Britain's 'down-fall as surely as naval defeat'. He stressed that no other country 'is in so precarious a state as regards its food supplies as our own' and that if the nation's ports were closed or its ships sank, then the British people would starve.¹⁵⁶ He again brought the matter of the Merchant Navy before the House of Lords several weeks later. He warned that Britain could not rely upon neutral tonnage to assist its Merchant Navy in a future war as it had done during the First World War, nor could it rely upon the fact that its cargo-carrying tonnage had increased. He stated that it was not the tonnage that counts, but the number of ships and that a 'torpedo or bomb does not sink a percentage of tonnage; it sinks a ship'.¹⁵⁷ Lloyd was part of numerous other debates as the decade progressed, while Commander Marsden, Navy League Executive Committee member and Conservative MP, lobbied for the Merchant Navy in the House of Commons.¹⁵⁸

Despite such work, Lloyd was 'amazed at the complacency of Parliament, amazed that at the most critical period probably in the whole of our history we should not be more interested in or more concerned at the depletion in our shipping'.¹⁵⁹

At the league's GCM in 1938, the decline of the Merchant Navy was once again the central topic of discussion. Lloyd felt that as the Royal Navy was rapidly rearming, the decline of the Merchant Navy was the issue which 'all our energies and [the] country's attention must be directed because the position is extremely grave'.¹⁶⁰ He felt that there was little indication that either the government or the public appreciated the severity of the situation. Reflecting on his own work, Lloyd stated that he had spoken in Parliament, addressed important meetings throughout the country, was in constant communication with the Shipping Federation (founded in 1890 to promote the interests of shipowners) and almost every important shipowner in the country. He nevertheless referred to the decline of British shipping in the Pacific and in the Baltic and criticised the lack of protection to Britain's coastal trade.¹⁶¹ Others shared Lloyd's sentiments and urged that the 'public must be roused from their comfortable coma to acute awareness of the disagreeable fact that the Red Ensign is being gradually ousted off the seas by the foreigner, and that the trident is being snatched from the hand of Britannia'.¹⁶²

The league's work in relation to the Merchant Navy received extensive press coverage and was supported by members of the royal family – including Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) – and a number of Admiralty figures including Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, first sea lord of the Admiralty from 1938 to 1939; Sir Roger Keyes, admiral of the fleet; and Alfred Duff Cooper, first lord of the Admiralty from 1937 to 1938.¹⁶³ Lloyd also received the backing of Sir Samuel Hoare, then first lord of the Admiralty, at the league's Nelson Day dinner in 1936. Hoare paid tribute to the 'sincerity of purpose, to the resolute courage and to the unshaken patriotism that Lord Lloyd has always shown to the country and to the Empire during the many years of his distinguished career'. Hoare also noted that while the Admiralty and Navy League had a 'particularly independent line of action and they do not always agree, both of us are engaged in the same task'.¹⁶⁴

By 1939, Lloyd felt that the league could claim 'quite definitively that during the last two or three years we have done more than any other body to compel the Government to make proposals for subsidies for the Merchant Service'.¹⁶⁵ The league expressed satisfaction that the government had passed the Merchant Shipping Assistance Act in early 1939, granting large financial aid to the shipping industry, and felt this was due to its long campaign on behalf of the Merchant Navy.¹⁶⁶ It considered the

act as an important contribution to the ‘security of our country’ and that the league ‘merit[ed] the gratitude of both Government and people’.¹⁶⁷ Such sentiments were shared by Duff Cooper, who remarked that ‘the splendid state of the Navy owed much to the vigilance and energy of the Navy League’.¹⁶⁸

Conclusion

By the late 1930s, Britain’s rearmament programme was concentrated on two key technological arms – the Royal Navy and the RAF – both of which ‘were among the very strongest in the world’.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, ‘in absolute terms Britain spent at least as much as any other country on warfare, and about the same as it had spent in the Edwardian years’.¹⁷⁰ As Edgerton notes, the Royal Navy ‘out-built all other navies in nearly all periods of the interwar years and in nearly all classes of warship’. The RAF was accorded strategic priority in the 1930s and, in terms of total expenditure, subsequently overtook the Army in 1937 and the Royal Navy in 1938.¹⁷¹ In 1940, Britain was the leading aircraft manufacturer in the world, producing 50 per cent more airframes and engines than Germany.¹⁷² Although the two leagues may not have influenced the shape of rearmament, both organisations exerted considerable effort to keep issues of military strength within public and parliamentary consciousness. In many respects, the Navy and Air Leagues were among the chief proponents of Britain’s development as a warfare state.

Notes

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7. Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65.
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13. London Metropolitan University, Trades Union Congress Library Collections, Labour Research Department Pamphlet Collection, 2/C/2, Air League of the British Empire 1925–7, Air League of the British Empire, Pamphlet, 1927, 4; Air League of the British Empire, Circular, 9 July 1927, 1.
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15. AL, AL Minute Book, AGM, 10 July 1934, 2; Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: Widening Horizons, 1930–1934* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979), 223–4.
16. Uri Bialer, 'Elite Opinion and Defence Policy: Air Power Advocacy and British Rearmament during the 1930s', *British Journal of International Studies*, 6 (1980): 32.
17. Richard Overy, *The Birth of the RAF, 1918: The World's First Air Force* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), Chapter 4. See Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Mottistone Papers, MSS Mottistone 38, Press cuttings, 1917–1920 for his resignation.
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22. *Air League Bulletin*, March 1921, 119.
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33. *Air*, December 1927, 56.
34. *Air*, April 1928, 55.
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37. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 14 June 1933, 2.
38. *The Times*, 30 November 1933, 7.
39. Hansard, HC, 5th series, vol. 283, col. 958 (29 November 1933).
40. Hansard, HC, 5th series, vol. 283, col. 1012; 1016. Air League members were also prominent in debates on air power in mid-1934. Hansard, HC, 5th series, vol. 286, c. 2027 (8 March 1934).
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43. *Air Review*, September 1934, 80; AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 10 April 1934, 2; *Air League Bulletin*, October 1923, 28.
44. NMM, MSY/6/3/3/28, NL Minute Book 1936–42, MEC, 2 December 1936, 3.
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Chapter 4

Nation and empire

Speaking at the Navy League's GCM in 1923, Sir Cyril Cobb declared that

the main fact we have to drill into people's minds is that our existence as an Empire depends upon the freedom of the Navy to keep the seas of the world open, always and everywhere . . . The prestige of British diplomacy and the safety of British nationals, wherever they may be, the protection of British trade and the linking together of all settlements of Britishers, wherever they may be found, is the real object of the Navy League, and, in fact, means the preservation of the British Empire. That means that the Navy must be free to go everywhere to keep up British prestige in every sea in the world.¹

A year earlier, the Air League similarly reflected that 'it is high time that the Englishman, who already thinks imperially with regard to the Navy and the Army, should think imperially with regard to the air'. In emphasising to the British public that the aeroplane was central to the maintenance of nation and empire, the league stated that the air was the 'all-important factor with regard to the intercourse between Great Britain and the many other portions of the Empire scattered throughout the world'.²

As such statements indicate, nation and empire were central reference points for each league throughout the interwar period. Building upon the book's previous focus on political, institutional and official expressions of militarism, this chapter examines how both leagues attempted to connect and maintain links between the Royal Navy, the RAF and the often-interconnected notions of nation, empire, and national and imperial identity. The two leagues promoted sea power and air power for the preservation and protection of the nation, especially in relation to

the threat posed by the aeroplane to Britain's insularity and status as an island nation, but they also championed the navy and the air force as symbols of pride, patriotism and national prestige. Both leagues equally pointed to the importance of a strong navy and air force for imperial policing and the maintenance of empire, as well as a way of promoting trade, commerce and imperial unity. Each organisation attempted to spread its message beyond Britain through a broad range of overseas branches, although they did so with varying success. While post-war manifestations of nation and empire often 'eschewed the aggressively jingoistic flag-waving associated with late Victorian and Edwardian expressions of imperial patriotism', there was nevertheless still space for triumphal, aggrandising and, in certain cases, militaristic expressions of popular nationalism and imperialism after 1918.³

Islandhood and insularity

An inherent love of the sea in the Briton was a recurring motif in much of the Navy League's rhetoric throughout the interwar years. As *The Navy* put it in 1931, one of the 'influences that has most powerfully contributed towards the greatness' of the nation was the 'sea spirit of our peoples; that sea spirit which comprises a true love of the sea and of adventurous wandering across the oceans of the world'.⁴ Such sentiments were not confined to the Navy League, but were echoed by the Prince of Wales at the league's Trafalgar Day dinner the following year. 'We are', he declared, 'a maritime race, and all maritime races have only been successful if they have been able to preserve the quality of sea-sense. The sea-sense is one of the most valuable of our heritages . . . and one that has helped us through our times of greatest stress and danger.'⁵ This connection has attracted the attention of numerous historians since. As Paul Readman notes, Britain's inhabitants 'have long celebrated the felicitous insularity of the sceptred isle, made safe from continental contaminations by the English Channel . . . Cut off by the Channel, Britain and British identities were inextricably connected to the sea.'⁶ The advent of the aeroplane, however, challenged the long-standing insularity afforded by the sea, for some even marking the end of Britain's status as an island nation. The Air League certainly subscribed to this viewpoint, warning 'this country is no longer an island' and that the 'English Channel no longer exists'.⁷

Unsurprisingly, the Navy League did not share this position. It declared that '[i]n spite of all the contributions which the engineer and the scientist have made to human progress, we remain islanders. We draw our strength from the sea.'⁸ Despite mounting concerns surrounding

the destructive potential of the aeroplane, the Navy League emphasised the navy's continued importance for both national and imperial defence. Commenting in late 1935 on those who suggested that Britain was 'no more an island power and the seas no longer kept us safe and "made us we"', the Navy League stated 'they are silent now. Great and vital as the air arm is, it is now once more accepted that the Navy alone can secure our trade routes, bring us food and cargoes, defend us from invasion and defeat, make sure of victory, and give us any certainty of peace.'⁹ In fact, for the Navy League, the navy was so central to the national character that when the LNU called for naval disarmament, the league described the union as being 'neither British nor in favour of freedom'.¹⁰

Pride, patriotism and technology

In light of increasing threats to Britain's insularity, the Navy League drew upon themes of naval heritage, nostalgia and patriotism. Writing prior to the opening of the National Maritime Museum in the late 1930s, for instance, the league enthused that the public would be able to see 'treasures which for the first time under one roof will illustrate the greatness of the British race of seafarers', with the museum 'perpetuating the glorious traditions of England as a sea power'.¹¹ As we shall see, Trafalgar Day, in particular, was used to point to the navy as an enduring symbol of national pride and prestige, but there were other ways in which the league connected the navy and nation. In celebrating St George's Day, the league hoped to remind the public 'what chivalry, loyalty, and patriotism have stood for in the past'. In particular, it sought to 'focus the attention of all patriotic Englishmen upon England and the place that it occupies in the great commonwealth of nations proudly known as the British Empire'.¹² As the Zeebrugge Raid, in which an attempt was made to prevent the passage of German submarines by blocking the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend, took place on St George's Day in 1918, the league issued St George's Day messages to link notions of duty, patriotism and national identity with the sea. In 1926, it stated that its purpose on St George's Day was to

teach the lessons of duty and devotion which are enshrined in the white flag and red cross of St George, and to see that the memory of such deeds as the storming of the Mole at Zeebrugge live as a great inspiration in the minds of generations to come. It is for this that we ask the support of all those who love their country and have grasped the secret of their greatness.¹³

While the Navy League used the annual event to commemorate those who carried out the Zeebrugge Raid, it also disseminated a range of propagandistic messages. St George's Day messages criticised disarmament, pacts and international agreements, with the league calling on Britons to instead remember 'the great deeds of our sailors, which, together with those sister services, have upheld the honour, prestige and renown of our nation'.¹⁴ Although defence and security were vital issues in promoting the navy and nation, the league also highlighted the long-standing links between the sea, national identity and British prestige.

In seeking to reinforce connections between the navy and the nation, the league was careful to distinguish between its promotion of navalism and militarism. As Arnold White declared in 1919: 'Never again should educated politicians and statesmen be allowed with impunity to confuse the public mind by telling them that Sea Power and Militarism are the same thing; or that British "Navalism" is a form of Prussian Militarism'.¹⁵ As Prussian militarism was invariably linked with a 'regimented and militarized civilian population' – as well as the 'political preponderance of the military class' – the league attempted to distance itself from such associations by framing it as a 'foreign' problem.¹⁶ Moreover, as the navy was central to the national character, Britain's status as an island nation and 'seen – uniquely – as an institution which ensured British freedoms', this ostensibly helped the league avoid associations with continental forms of militarism.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this did not prevent the league from reminding parliament and the British people that the navy remained the 'Sure Shield of our national existence and the stalwart guardian of the national honour'.¹⁸

Despite widespread concerns regarding the nation's vulnerability to aerial bombardment, the Air League promoted the aeroplane as a symbol of patriotism, pride and national identity. One way of doing so was through celebrating the pioneering achievements of British aviators, whose feats had political and symbolic significance and, although not inherently militaristic, were frequently linked to the celebration of nation and national identity. Of course, this aligned with the league's political ambitions and its promotion of airmindedness. For example, upon Sir Alan Cobham's return from his flight to Australia in October 1926, the league declared that

It is impossible to over-estimate the educational and propaganda value of Sir Alan's flights . . . We are, as a nation, unreceptive of new ideas, and the revolutionary aspect of aviation has in the past found no great favour from a British point of view . . . Sir Alan has achieved a great feat, by stirring British minds into enthusiasm with regard to his

individual achievements, and necessarily such appreciation involves a greater realisation of the great future that awaits the aeroplane.¹⁹

Bernhard Rieger suggests that aviators 'became the subject of popular curiosity verging on the obsessive' following the First World War and the response to Cobham's arrival certainly suggests this is the case.²⁰ Some estimated that hundreds of thousands gathered to witness Cobham's landing on the Thames, leading the Air League to declare that the British people 'could, and did, indulge in hero worship'.²¹

The Air League ascribed similar significance to Amy Johnson's flight from England to Australia in 1930. Upon her arrival in Australia, the league congratulated Johnson on her 'magnificent flight' and hoped she would 'inspire British aviation and raise it from its apathy'.²² Like the Air League, both Cobham and Johnson used their platforms to promote air-mindedness and British aerial supremacy. Shortly after her return to England, Johnson declared: 'All I want is that England should lead the world in aviation', while Cobham later urged that 'the importance of flying . . . the development of flying cannot be exaggerated. It is so essential that the public of Britain should become air-minded'.²³ Given these statements, it is, perhaps, natural that the Air League worked closely with such figures and that the league's leadership contained an array of pioneering aviators. More broadly, it was clearly important to the league to commemorate and celebrate those who championed and advanced British aviation, modernity and technological innovation. Beyond Cobham and Johnson, the league eulogised the achievements of a range of aviators including Lady Heath, Lady Bailey, the Duchess of Bedford, Peggy Salaman and James Mollison (among others).²⁴ Themes of Britishness, modernity and technological mastery were also evident in the league's promotion of another notable form of interwar aerial theatre – the Schneider Trophy.

Held in Britain in 1919, 1923, 1929 and 1931, the Schneider Trophy was the most famous international air race of the period and afforded the chance 'to prove that Britain led the world in aircraft design and engine manufacture'.²⁵ Following Britain's victory in 1927, the league co-organised a dinner for the winning team, at which Lord Thomson, former (and future) secretary of state for air, declared that the victory was 'the greatest triumph of British aviation for the last few years. It was a triumph of organisation, method, manufacture, skill, and grit.' Trenchard similarly proclaimed that the team 'worthily upheld the honour of aviation in this country'.²⁶ The league then staged an exhibition of the winning seaplane, a Supermarine S.5, on Horse Guards Parade, Whitehall. The machine was a source of national pride, with one newspaper describing

it as the 'Glory of England'.²⁷ Over the space of a week, nearly 100,000 people attended the exhibition.²⁸

After Britain's Schneider victory in 1929, the league again expressed its satisfaction: 'we have drawn attention once more to the supremacy of British technique and to the skill of British pilots'.²⁹ While commending the victory, the league criticised the government's lack of support for the nation's aircraft industry. In doing so, it echoed Sempill's assertion that

The results of this contest have far-reaching effects; they have repercussions in industry, in commerce, in our national defence, in our technical knowledge, in our international prestige. The nation winning the trophy is regarded as the supreme leader of aeronautical progress, and it is vital that we should strain every nerve to retain it.³⁰

It is unsurprising, then, that when the Labour government confirmed in early 1931 that it would no longer finance the race, this resulted in widespread criticism. The Air League was one of the principal opponents, describing the decision as 'disastrous and blundering'.³¹ The league immediately contacted Sir William Mackenzie (1st Baron Amulree), secretary of state for air from 1930 to 1931, outlining its opposition.³² It also issued a public declaration that 'never before has anyone interested in the Nation's prestige in the air world been so shocked as by the unutterable stupidity of the Government's present decision'. It continued, stating that victory in the race was more than an advertisement of British aircraft and pilots but was the embodiment of the country's intellect, numerous industries and a 'symbol of national skill'. The league warned that to 'permit a stupid, fuzzy-brained Cabinet to throw away a national asset of this order simply must not be tolerated. By such deeds shall we be brought to disaster'.³³ Such pressure undoubtedly contributed to MacDonald's announcement that RAF personnel and machines could be used in the race, provided that the RAC could raise £100,000 to cover the costs. It was Lady Houston who donated the £100,000 required to fund the British team, with Houston noting that she was 'utterly weary of the lie-down-and-kick-me attitude of the Socialist Government . . . I live for England and want to see England always on top'.³⁴ The Schneider Trophy was an important means through which to promote a particularly 'airminded nationalism' in the period, with hundreds of thousands of spectators attending the event.³⁵

Beyond promoting individual aviators and the Schneider Trophy, the Air League celebrated the technological innovation and modernity of British machines more broadly. It frequently advertised and promoted flying races such as the King's Cup – asserting that the event 'showed that in the development of light aeroplanes England is supreme' – as well as organising its own events.³⁶ The league staged flying races including

the 'Air League Challenge Cup' and in 1931 it held a 'Speed Ball' which paid tribute to 'British speed victories on land, sea and in the air'.³⁷ While the Air League celebrated British engineering and technology in relation to civil aviation, it was equally aware of the military capabilities of British machines. When two of the RAF's Vickers Wellesley bombers broke the world's long-distance record in 1938, flying non-stop from Egypt to Australia, the league wrote that it was 'one of the really valuable records . . . A machine which can fly for over 7,000 miles can unite the Empire in peace and war . . . Alternatively, for shorter distances it can carry vast quantities of military load. It must be, and is, a most valuable addition to our forces.'³⁸

Pioneering flights, flying demonstrations and other forms of aerial theatre occupied an important place in the popular civic ritual of interwar Britain. The Air League was an active proponent of spectacle and theatre – both as a promoter and an organiser. Indeed, the league was keenly aware that aerial theatre was a politically and culturally popular way of promoting flight, technology and modernity – particularly in relation to nation and national prestige.

Trade, communication and security

Although the Navy League celebrated Britain's islandhood as a point of national pride, it was keenly aware that this made the nation uniquely vulnerable: 'There is no parallel in the long record of the ages to the absolute dependence of the forty-five million people of this country upon the sea'.³⁹ To advance this message, the league engaged in its usual channels of dissemination including public meetings, articles in *The Navy*, letters to the press and the production of a broad range of pamphlets.⁴⁰ It also frequently lectured to empire-minded bodies such as the Royal Empire Society, the Imperial Institute and the Women's Guild of Empire.⁴¹ On a local level, the league further connected the navy and the empire, with the league's Glasgow Branch taking part in naval displays during the Glasgow Civic and Empire Week.⁴² The league's leadership also disseminated the navalist message beyond Britain, with senior figures carrying out tours to New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.⁴³ Such tours, the league suggested, allowed it to achieve one of its key objectives – namely promoting 'the maintenance of the sea sense throughout the Dominions and the Empire'.⁴⁴

The Navy League attracted a range of prominent imperialists such as Amery, Curzon and Churchill, all of whom used the league to promote both sea- and empire-mindedness.⁴⁵ As the league's president, Lord Lloyd

in particular used the league as a platform from which to connect naval supremacy with empire and imperial sentiment. Described by one Navy League stalwart as an 'apostle' of a 'united, powerful, and self-confident Empire', and by historians since as 'the greatest of imperial patriots', Lloyd frequently impressed upon the British public 'a sense of their Imperial privileges, obligations, and responsibilities' with the navy representing 'the indispensable instrument in achieving that object'.⁴⁶

To maintain Britain's status as an island nation, trade and commerce were, of course, vital issues. The Navy League warned Britons that their dependence on overseas commodities and food supplies was, in fact, so great that 'if the sea were closed to them and the heavily laden ships could not pass over the eighty thousand miles of sea routes of the Empire, they would be condemned to starve in impotent idleness'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it cautioned that the 'paralysis of all industry at home, and slow starvation through the cutting off of our supplies' would be 'no less painful an end than extermination by high explosives or poison gas'.⁴⁸ Such warnings, while doing little to distance the Navy League from charges of alarmism, were constantly issued by the league throughout the period.

For the Navy League, the only way to protect the nation from invasion and to maintain trade and security was through a 'Navy strong enough to police the ocean routes in times of peace, and to meet any emergency that may arise in time of war'.⁴⁹ The league was among those who continued to advocate the use of 'gunboat diplomacy' to maintain the imperial system and to protect its overseas possessions and people.⁵⁰ As an article in *The Navy* put it, the 'Navy has to be ready to land forces to protect lives and property against rioting natives'. 'Education and a smattering of civilisation', the article continued, 'has not prevented the natives getting wildly excited and losing all control of their actions, in which event the steadiness, discipline and good nature of the bluejacket and marine makes him the ideal policeman'.⁵¹ Yet, imperial policing was not aggressive or expansionist, according to the league, but was rather an extension of Britain's long-standing global commitments. The league stated that 'from time immemorial it has been the function of the British to act as the policeman of the seas', with the navy representing the 'guarantor of peace, not only for ourselves but for all mankind'.⁵² Expenditure on the navy, and cruisers in particular, was not, therefore, a 'jingo idea' or in the 'nature of "militarism" or waste, but of necessary insurance'.⁵³ More broadly, maintaining the 'highways of the ocean' was deemed to be a measure of global prestige. If the navy was not kept at sufficient levels, the league suggested that 'our trade and our prestige must suffer. If prestige is lost, security is lost; if security is lost, trade is lost; if trade is lost, all is lost'.⁵⁴

Although the Navy League promoted the navy as a means of reinforcing both national and imperial security, it also highlighted the ways in which the navy could act as a tool of unity capable of strengthening the 'imperial bond' with Britain.⁵⁵ As the league's Nelson Day message in 1930 emphasised, the 'navy is more than ever the "Sure Shield" of Britain, her Dominions and her Colonies, of the supplies which are the lifeblood of the homeland, and of the sea communications which hold our family of nations together'.⁵⁶ The tendency to think of the empire as 'one body politic, with its capital in London' was a common refrain in the league's rhetoric.⁵⁷ Indeed, Navy League figures described the empire as 'a human entity, the British Isles being the heart, the Dominions the limbs and the numerous sea trade-lines the arteries. If any of the arteries were severed trouble and suffering would ensue, and eventually the whole British Empire would be endangered'.⁵⁸

It is important to underline, however, that the 'obsession with navalism and the Empire reinforced one overarching feature of imperial unity: that navies remained the preserve of a Westernised, European population' and that the concept of a British "Sea Empire" stressed the racial union of its white leadership and precluded the participation of non-white elements'. This can be traced through elements of the Navy League's work. When "native gentlemen" in Bombay approached the League to form a branch in 1905, it "politely declined".⁵⁹ The league was also not above stoking 'xenophobic sentiments in order to create public rancour against the presence of foreign seamen on British ships', instead demanding 'British men for British ships'.⁶⁰ While the league's hostility towards 'foreigners' and 'lascars' in the merchant services was particularly prevalent prior to the First World War, the 'principle of British men for British ships' was maintained after 1918.⁶¹ Navy League speakers called for an 'All-British Merchant Service' and stated that the '30,000 foreigners' and 'aliens' employed in 'British ships at the outbreak of war . . . had been a source of great danger in the hour of crisis'.⁶² Despite the emergence of a 'gentle', 'domesticated' imperialism after 1918, the outlook and propaganda of the league was, on occasion, characterised by racism and xenophobia.⁶³

As in the Navy League's case, the theme of imperial unity featured prominently in the Air League's public pronouncements. J.M. Kenworthy believed that the aeroplane was 'one of the best means of consolidating and developing the Empire' and could 'do much for world peace by improving communications between peoples, helping them to understand and know each other better and thus assist in breaking down prejudices and avoiding international hostilities'. Although the aeroplane had 'obliterated frontiers', Kenworthy hoped that 'man's conquest of the air' was 'one of

the great steps towards peace'.⁶⁴ One way the league attempted to improve communications between Britain and the self-governing dominions was through supporting the development of aerial transport for mail alongside calls for the creation of a formalised Empire Air Mail Scheme in the 1930s. By dramatically increasing the speed at which mail could be transported, the Air League suggested that this would bring 'the Dominions and the Colonies nearer to the Mother Country . . . The British overseas States earnestly wish to be nearer to the homeland in terms of time and space as well as in sentiment.'⁶⁵ Yet, while the Air League suggested that the use of 'aerial post' would help to maintain the nation's commerce and communications, it also suggested that 'commercial supremacy in the air means a powerful reserve for our Flying Forces should the country be in danger of an attack from the air'.⁶⁶

As a way of further connecting the 'imperial core and periphery', air transport provided a means through which to 'modernise, maintain, protect, reassert and legitimate Empire'.⁶⁷ Alongside its support for imperial air mail schemes, therefore, the Air League lobbied for the creation of British commercial air services to the empire.⁶⁸ In late 1923, the league criticised both the speed of negotiations surrounding the creation of a National Air Company and the delays in placing the commercial air services of the country under government subsidy and supervision.⁶⁹ Following the creation of Imperial Airways in 1924 – merged from four existing British airlines – the league claimed that 'there is good reason to believe' that its propaganda, particularly letters to national newspapers, 'materially assisted to bring about the formation of the Imperial Airways'.⁷⁰ As the 'profile and performance' of Imperial Airways was 'bound up with Britain's rating on the world stage, and with imperial propaganda', it served to reinforce the Air League's work in linking the aeroplane to the empire.⁷¹ Descriptive articles and adverts for Imperial Airways subsequently appeared in Air League literature, calling for Britons to 'Think Imperially, Act Imperially, Travel Imperially'.⁷²

While the Air League did much to promote the work of Imperial Airways, Imperial Airways and bodies such as the Empire Marketing Board (formed in 1926 to persuade British consumers to purchase goods from the empire) advanced the cause of the Air League in return. Major Wilfred Theodore Blake, pioneer aviator and author, worked on the Air League's behalf on a lecture tour organised by Imperial Airways and the Empire Marketing Board.⁷³ Imperial Airways even provided the Air League with aeroplanes to use in its propagandistic work, while the league secured discounted air travel for its members with Imperial Airways in an attempt to 'stimulate air travel by the creation of a class of regular air travellers genuinely interested in aviation'.⁷⁴ In addition, leading Imperial Airways

figures attended important Air League events. At the Air League's first annual dinner in 1928, Sir Eric Geddes, chairman of Imperial Airways, was one of the principal speakers and used the event to express his concern that the country was falling behind in the sphere of commercial aviation. To remedy this, he called on the Air League to pressure the government to develop imperial air lines and to contribute to the cultivation of an 'air sense' across the empire.⁷⁵

Despite promoting the aeroplane as means of strengthening communications, commerce and imperial unity, the Air League also emphasised the centrality of the aeroplane as a method of imperial control. Following the First World War, air control was widely used by Britain as a tool of imperial policing in Africa, India and the Middle East. To maintain its newly acquired mandates, particularly in Iraq, Britain resorted to the aerial bombardment of villages and tribes 'to put down unrest and subversive activities'.⁷⁶ Despite high civilian casualties, and subsequent criticism, aerial policing provided the RAF with the 'independent peacetime function' needed to preserve its institutional autonomy.⁷⁷ This was especially so as the RAF offered a cost-effective alternative to military occupation.⁷⁸ Given that proponents of air control admitted that 'terror was the scheme's underlying principle', it is striking that re-enactments of aerial attacks on 'native' villages and the bombing of 'savages' were performed at the Hendon Air Display, while Empire Air Day featured simulated aerial bombardments of a 'tribe of marauding natives who had attacked a peaceful village', a 'gun attack on a "native village"' and a bombardment of a 'desert village' which was 'quickly reduced to ashes' following an attack by the RAF.⁷⁹ While the imperial elements of aerial displays should not be overstated, it is easy to see why such set pieces have been labelled as 'tasteless and xenophobic'.⁸⁰

As questions concerning the abolition of bombing and proposals for an IAPF became increasingly pressing in the early 1930s, the 'inhumanity of air control' took on renewed importance.⁸¹ Despite this, the British government was reluctant to subject air control to 'international oversight'. When it proposed prohibitions on aerial bombardment at the World Disarmament Conference, it did so on the proviso that aeroplanes used 'for police purposes in certain outlying areas' were exempt.⁸² While this prompted widespread opposition, it was supported by the Air League, with Chamier expressing satisfaction that he was able to inspire a counter-motion against calls for the government to relinquish its use of police bombing.⁸³ At the league's AGM in 1933, Lord Mottistone suggested that 'the conquest of the air by man was a great civilising power and capable of bringing great benefits to mankind', including the possibility of making war 'less inhumane' and 'less cruel'.⁸⁴ Chamier, meanwhile, claimed

that it was ‘incorrect to assume that British squadrons . . . were for ever “mercilessly slaying and bombing” hill tribe villages. Police action was what it amounted to . . . There was nothing inhuman about the procedure. Air patrolling had the right psychological reaction on unruly tribes.’⁸⁵ A writer in *Air Review* even suggested that ‘at its worst, compared to an ordinary army – underpaid and bloodthirsty . . . the bombing aeroplane is a dove of peace’.⁸⁶

While the Air League supported the use of air control for the maintenance of empire, suggesting it was the only means by which to maintain ‘law and order in primitive parts of the world’, it complained that public opinion could not always distinguish between aerial bombardment ‘after due warning, of rebellious tribesmen in wild country and the bombing of towns in civilised countries’.⁸⁷ Clearly, the league was far more reluctant to advocate the use of aerial bombardment against supposedly more ‘civilised’ European powers. For instance, following the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 – in which Italian aircraft not only provided air support to advancing troops, but deliberately used mustard gas, phosgene and arsine against civilians – the league suggested that the conflict was ‘likely to cause suffering to comparatively few’ and that little would be gained by forceful intervention by the League of Nations.⁸⁸ Imagining the use of an international air force by the League of Nations, the Air League asked ‘Will it bomb Italian towns and thus ensure a holocaust of civilians without regard to age or sex – in the cause of peace? Will it bomb Italian transports and murder thousands of young men whose only crime is that they are obeying orders?’ It suggested that if it was successful in bombing the ‘Italian field force out of Africa’ then it would ‘bring about one of the greatest massacres in history, for at the first sign of weakness the Abyssinians would sweep over Italian Africa like wolves on the fold’.⁸⁹ Seemingly, the Air League was among those who deemed the casualties of imperial air control to be of a ‘different calibre than calculated attacks on European or British civilians’.⁹⁰

Empire, imperial exhibitions and education

To connect the empire with the navy and the aeroplane in the public mind, each league drew upon a series of tangible links ranging from trade, commerce and communication to emigration, travel and warfare. Yet, such connections were also mediated and reinforced through the ‘realm of the imagination’, with both leagues employing spectacle, military theatre and imperial exhibitions – both in Britain and beyond – to propagate and publicise the centrality of the navy and the aeroplane

to the maintenance of empire.⁹¹ For the Navy League, the Empire Cruise of 1923 to 1924, in which Britain dispatched a 'Special Service Squadron' of battlecruisers on a tour across the globe, provided a setting in which to propound the navy, empire and imperial unity. Millions of spectators witnessed the cruise, including in Sierra Leone, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and the Caribbean (among other places).⁹² Navy League dominion branches took advantage of the tour to inspect visiting warships and to arrange social events for men of the fleet.⁹³

As one of its primary purposes, the tour emphasised that the 'navy was a common bond of empire linking the "Mother Country" with its overseas possessions'.⁹⁴ While the Navy League had no formal connection with the cruise, its message of imperial unity and a common maritime heritage closely aligned with many of the league's objectives. As *The Navy* declared:

The presence of the ships in the ports visited has served to impress upon the minds of the thousands of our kinsmen overseas the fact that, as it is by the sea that we as a nation live, so we must see to it that the British Navy, which has ever acted as the guardian of the sea routes, the arteries of the Empire, shall ever be kept at a strength adequate for the fulfilment of that purpose.⁹⁵

Of course, while the tour sought to underline the navy as a tool of imperial unity and provide a reminder of Britain's prestige on the international stage, there were competing responses to the cruise, ranging from unofficial, unsanctioned events to more explicit opposition from anti-colonial nationalists.⁹⁶ Due to these contrasting narratives, the Navy League included largely sanitised first-hand accounts of the cruise in *The Navy* and published messages that reinforced the idea that the 'King's ships, flying the White Ensign, will bring home proudly to the minds of all of British descent, that unity of strength and purpose for which the Royal Navy stands'.⁹⁷

In addition to promoting the Empire Cruise, the Navy League advanced themes of empire and imperial unity in a range of other settings. In 1924, it organised the 'All-Empire Navy League Fair', which was attended by the high commissioners and agent-generals of the self-governing dominions. The fair included stalls, orchestral music and concerts and, while not overtly political, was undoubtedly of propagandistic value for the league. This was especially so as Earl Beatty used his opening speech to praise the Navy League in its attempts to 'inculcate into the minds of all the importance of the Navy in the defence of the Empire' stating that it was a 'great national asset'.⁹⁸

The British Empire Exhibition, held at Wembley from 1924 to 1925, provided the league with another important (and highly visible) space through which to promote both navy and empire – particularly as approximately 27 million people visited the event.⁹⁹ Writing shortly after the exhibition's inauguration, the league asserted that it was only through the 'never ceasing protection' afforded by the British navy that the empire existed. The league hoped that by visiting the exhibition, attendees would understand that 'it is the duty of all far-seeing patriots to see to it that . . . the efficiency of our Navy to continue to maintain its proud position as the "Sure Shield" of the Empire is never imperilled.'¹⁰⁰ To further its message, the league had its own stall at the exhibition, where it disseminated its publications alongside pictures, postcards, photographs and books on naval subjects. In addition, the stall included flags, naval charts and even furniture repurposed from broken-up ships.¹⁰¹ The league was also granted space in the government pavilion, where it displayed a series of naval pictures and relics.¹⁰² In 1925, the league used this space to show 'the supreme naval position occupied by the British Empire at the conclusion of the war' alongside the 'position as it will be in three years' time unless adequate provision is made to replace existing cruisers and small craft that are rapidly becoming obsolete'.¹⁰³

The British Empire Exhibition represented an equally promising site for the Air League to connect nation, empire and the aeroplane. In early 1924, however, the league expressed concern that 'the authorities have totally failed to produce or influence the production of any organised scheme of flying in connection with the forthcoming exhibition'.¹⁰⁴ In response, the league initiated plans for an 'Air Day' at Wembley, although the scheme was met with an 'apparent unwillingness' on the part of the exhibition's organisers and so was abandoned.¹⁰⁵ The league was similarly frustrated in its attempt to disseminate its propaganda and publications. When the Air League made enquiries about holding a series of lectures at the exhibition, it was informed that no space was available.¹⁰⁶ When it attempted to sell its journal and educational literature, the league found the terms laid down by organisers 'so onerous that it would have been impossible to sell literature . . . except at a heavy loss'.¹⁰⁷

Although the Air League was frustrated by the British Empire Exhibition authorities, it nevertheless utilised a broad range of aerial displays and spectacle to link aviation and empire. While the pioneering flights of aviators provided an important source of national pride, their exploits were also valuable for 'spreading the gospel of airmindedness' beyond Britain.¹⁰⁸ For example, the league telegraphed Sir Alan Cobham upon his arrival in South Africa in March 1926, congratulating him on his flight, requesting that he assist the league in forming a

South African branch and stating that it wished to 'take advantage of the valuable propaganda work you are undertaking in order to further [the] education of [the] public in air matters'.¹⁰⁹ Upon receiving a CBE for her flight to Australia, the Air League congratulated Amy Johnson and wished her success in stimulating 'a firm resolve for an Empire as glorious in the air as it has been on the sea'. In response, Johnson assured the league that 'I am doing my utmost to spread airmindedness throughout Australia'.¹¹⁰

Other notable aerial feats of the period – including the Houston Mount Everest Expedition of 1933, the first successful flight over Mount Everest – provided the Air League with additional opportunities to spread both national and imperial airmindedness. As part of the expedition, cameramen shot footage of the mountain from above, securing 'the most complete photographic survey records of the Himalayas yet produced'.¹¹¹ As such, it was an important moment in the history of aviation, photography and surveying, yet it was also an act 'rich with political significance'.¹¹² Indeed, the Air League was among those who not only saw the scientific value of the expedition, but interpreted it as a representation of 'British imperial superiority' and as a 'national triumph of British aviation on the world stage'.¹¹³ The league praised the flight as 'one of the greatest achievements in the eventful annals of British air history'. It also stressed that the expedition was 'dependent for success upon the aircraft and engines whose efficient performance under such arduous conditions constitutes one of the most remarkable technical triumphs of British aeronautical engineering in recent years'.¹¹⁴ Beyond publicising the flight, former and future Air League figures were connected with the expedition: Sempill and Burnham, the latter of whom was fundamental in the league's reorganisation in the 1920s and a generous financier, were both on the expedition's committee, while the Marquess of Clydesdale, one of the pilots, later sat on the league's Executive Committee.¹¹⁵ Clydesdale and David McIntyre, the expedition's second pilot, also flew on Empire Air Day, while Empire Air Day exhibits included the camera used in the Everest expedition.¹¹⁶

To increase awareness of aviation in relation to imperial communications among its subscribers, the British public and members of parliament, the Air League engaged in a number of other activities. For its members, the league arranged special access to events, including an Imperial Airways exhibition at London's Science Museum, that showcased the progress and development of imperial air routes.¹¹⁷ More broadly, in August 1928 the league staged an exhibition of the flying boat *Calcutta* on the Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament. This biplane was built by Imperial Airways to operate on the England to Australia air route. The exhibition drew vast audiences, both a 'constant stream

of members of Parliament' and members of the public whose interest remained 'unabated'.¹¹⁸

Both the Navy and Air Leagues took advantage of various manifestations of popular imperial celebrations, however they were also active in more-established forms of popular civic ritual surrounding empire. On Empire Day – staged from 1904 to celebrate the British Empire in schools and communities throughout Britain – the Navy League engaged in a range of activities and issued Empire Day messages.¹¹⁹ While Empire Day may have been increasingly contentious after 1918, the league used the annual event to remind members of the public that Britain's empire was an 'Ocean Empire' made by 'the adventurous sea-spirit of the British race' which could only be maintained by 'the sea spirit alone'.¹²⁰ Although the league promoted the 'unity and continuity of our Imperial heritage', such messages also issued more stark warnings.¹²¹ In its 1925 Empire Day message, the league stated: 'It is essential that we have the strength to protect the trade routes of the Empire, for if we lost the power of ocean transport we are doomed to perish'.¹²² Like the Navy League, the Air League used Empire Day to promote the military strength of the nation. Empire Air Day, as explored fully in [Chapter 7](#), emphasised the importance of the aeroplane for imperial unity, communication and security, while empire was a key theme in much of the rhetoric surrounding the annual event.

In addition to its annual Empire Day messages, the Navy League engaged in a range of educational activities on Empire Day, organising essay competitions and providing lectures to thousands of children in schools.¹²³ The SCC, meanwhile, was also active in Empire Day events, including annual parades in Hyde Park, organised by the League of Empire and attended by hundreds of Navy League boys. The corps also attended religious services in St Paul's Cathedral.¹²⁴ More broadly, the Navy League's popular wall map – showing the British empire, its naval stations, trade routes and steamship lines – was displayed in classrooms and public buildings across the country and the empire and was an important means of 'representing the navalist message visually'.¹²⁵

Beyond spectacle and theatre, the Air League similarly underlined the imperial aspects of aviation to the nation's youth. In *Facts about Flying and the Civil Uses of Aviation*, a pamphlet that was circulated widely in schools, the league informed its readers that the development of civil aviation was a 'vital need' for the British Empire. It declared that

[I]t may be stated that on the development of our air power will the Empire's safety depend. As in the past our great shipping industry has been the bulwark of our great industries, so now must the air come into its own place of importance and thus, and thus only, will the 'British

Commonwealth of Nations' be linked up and retain its supremacy in the world.¹²⁶

Empire and aviation were central themes in essay competitions run by the league. These were held for its young members, attendees of public exhibitions aimed at schoolchildren and children in public schools. Subjects included 'The Importance of Air Communications for the Development of the British Empire' and 'The Importance of the Aeroplane to the British Empire'.¹²⁷ The educational endeavours of the league seemingly had some success. For instance, the winning entry of an essay competition held in 1927 featured an imaginary flight through the empire and the reflection that to the 'British Empire the growth of air communications is of vital importance; indeed, it may be said without exaggeration that on the strength of our air power will the safety of the Empire depend'.¹²⁸ Although it is difficult to measure how the Navy and Air Leagues' messages relating to empire were received by both adults and children alike, and while the extent to which the empire resonated with those in the metropole is the subject of extensive and long-standing scholarly debate, it is not the case that by the 1920s 'all residual imperial sentiment had been destroyed'.¹²⁹

Branches beyond Britain

To spread its message beyond Britain, the Navy League maintained an extensive and wide-ranging network of dominion and overseas branches. While there is not adequate space to explore such organisations fully, the league had branches in India, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Ceylon as well as multiple divisions in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Branches varied in size, effectiveness and levels of autonomy, although the British Navy League took pride in their work. For the league, this 'world-wide organization' was 'an invaluable link between Great Britain and her peoples beyond the seas'.¹³⁰ Furthermore, Navy League figures such as Sir Cyril Cobb suggested that the 'Overseas Dominions give us much more enthusiastic support – in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa' than 'we get in Bournemouth, or Eastbourne, or Margate'.¹³¹ The fortunes of dominion branches waxed and waned (as in the case of domestic branches), but many were long-standing organisations, with bodies such as the Auckland Branch being formed as early as January 1896.¹³²

To further consolidate the relationship between Britain and its overseas branches, the Navy League held a number of 'All-Empire Navy

League' conferences throughout the 1920s. Attended by overseas delegates, the conferences provided a forum in which to discuss naval policy and to achieve 'closer co-operation between the various elements of the Navy League throughout the Empire'.¹³³ While collaboration was a guiding principle of such meetings, they did not always attempt to establish a distinct, unifying policy or common set of objectives. As Linlithgow noted in 1925, while the British Navy League realised the 'immense benefit' of the conferences and the work of its overseas branches, 'the same problems present themselves in somewhat different lights in different parts of the Empire' and so a 'certain amount of elasticity' was required.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, there were issues upon which the British and dominion branches agreed, including a shared opposition of those who advocated unilateral disarmament and the belief that further reduction of Britain's navy would 'not only jeopardise the security of this country and the Empire' but would 'imperil world peace'.¹³⁵

In many respects, the activities of overseas Navy League branches closely reflected the work of the British Navy League. Many lobbied for increased naval armaments – particularly in relation to Britain's cruiser programme – by holding public meetings and lectures, issuing newspaper articles, sending deputations to dominion prime ministers, producing articles in their own periodicals and sending telegrams and letters to the British Navy League which were forwarded to leading British statesmen and national newspapers.¹³⁶ As in Britain, many overseas bodies had 'Ladies' Committees', 'Ladies' Auxiliaries' or 'Ladies' Sections' who were involved in various educational, charitable, social and organisational endeavours.¹³⁷

The commemoration of naval heritage and tradition formed an important component of the work of overseas branches. As Daniel Owen Spence observes, Trafalgar Day played a significant role in promoting sea-mindedness and fortifying imperial unity in Hong Kong after the First World War.¹³⁸ Writing on Trafalgar Day in 1924, meanwhile, the Navy League of South Africa hoped that the annual event would 'always be venerated by the Navy League and its branches throughout the Dominions as a Festival of Honour'.¹³⁹ The New South Wales Navy League Branch in Australia similarly felt that it was the responsibility of overseas branches to celebrate the annual event to not only champion 'Britain's naval traditions and eminence', but also the continued 'supreme importance of sea-power'.¹⁴⁰ To do so, overseas branches engaged in a range of activities, including wreath-laying ceremonies at monuments and memorials, banquets, parades, dances, lectures and film screenings for schoolchildren. Most branches also sent either representatives or floral wreaths to Trafalgar Day celebrations in London.

Alongside Trafalgar Day, youth and education represented key areas of interest. Overseas branches provided lectures in schools, organised film exhibitions and visits to naval and mercantile marine centres, and distributed literature to children.¹⁴¹ Essay competitions for schoolchildren were also common, with subjects including 'Sea Communications: Their Value and Protection' and 'The British Navy: Great Events in its History'.¹⁴² Many branches established connections with schools, with thousands of schoolchildren becoming juvenile members.¹⁴³ Dominion branches were similarly interested in training boys for naval careers. The Hawke's Bay Branch, New Zealand, pressured both the country's prime minister and the defence minister to establish a scheme for 'sea-training equal to those provided for boys desiring military training', while the league's South Africa Branch had its own ship that trained boys for sea careers.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Boys' Naval Brigades were formed in South Africa, while SCC branches were created in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere to keep 'alive the sea spirit of our race' and to 'enable boys to become good citizens of the Empire'.¹⁴⁵ As with members of the SCC in Britain, the SCC overseas engaged in a variety of public rituals, militaristic displays and days of remembrance. In Australia, cadets in New South Wales took part in commemorative events such as Anzac Day, while boys in Melbourne appeared in a 'Defence Week Tattoo' and a 'Naval Searchlight Pageant'.¹⁴⁶ As in Britain, activities relating to youth and education were not without opposition. Reflecting on the local Navy League branch's work in schools, a Wellington educational committee criticised the league for spreading the 'insidious propaganda of the profitmaking armaments manufacturers'.¹⁴⁷

Although dominion Navy League branches attempted to forge links with the metropole, they also provided a space for Britons to engage with homeland identity and culture while overseas.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, St George's Day, Empire Day and Trafalgar Day were used to celebrate Britain and Britishness. Alongside this, dominion Navy League branches helped naval families settle in new and distant parts of the world, with the Navy League of Canada assisting 500 families in this process between 1929 and 1933 alone.¹⁴⁹ This was much to the British Navy League's delight, with the league stating that Britons would take with them 'their ideals, their loyalty and their love for the British Empire' and that their emigration represented a 'triumph of statecraft'.¹⁵⁰ Branches also proved valuable for servicemen abroad, with the Shanghai Branch running the Union Jack Club, which provided comfort, entertainment and recreation for those in the services.¹⁵¹ Branches in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere similarly held social events such as banquets, dances and concerts for British servicemen.¹⁵²

While the Navy League had an extensive network of overseas branches, and in many cases worked closely with such bodies, the formation of dominion Air League branches took place on a much smaller scale. The Air League certainly attempted to cultivate airmindedness beyond Britain, stressing that its policy was both 'Imperial and National'.¹⁵³ In 1922, it expressed its satisfaction that a feature of its increasing membership 'is that a very large number of Colonial members have joined the league, the interest in aeronautics not being confined to Great Britain'. In fact, the league stated that the 'inhabitants of the Overseas Dominions and of the Crown Colonies individually appear to be far more alive to the value of aviation as a means of commercial transport than are the inhabitants of Great Britain'.¹⁵⁴

To assist its work overseas, the Air League formed a Consultative Dominion and Colonial Council which comprised the agent-generals for Tasmania, New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia and the high commissioners for Australia, South Africa and India.¹⁵⁵ Among other activities, the council supported the Air League in attempting to further increase its overseas membership through the creation of branches and by promoting the 'Overseas Prize Scheme' – an Air League initiative that offered a £50 silver airship model to the person able to secure the greatest number of new members.¹⁵⁶ This work was supported by leading aircraft industry figures including Handley Page and the Air Ministry, the latter of whom included Air League literature in communications to 'various Dominions and Colonies with regard to aerial development throughout the Empire'.¹⁵⁷

Although the Air League was able to increase its membership in the self-governing dominions with little resistance, it experienced more difficulty in countries under British rule. While the Air League initiated plans for an Indian branch in 1909, this was short-lived.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the creation of the 'Air League of India' in early 1927 was not an Air League initiative but was instead formed by the influential British businessman Sir Montagu de Pomeroy Webb. While largely led by prominent Britons based in Karachi, the Air League of India did attempt to attract a wider membership through various subscription rates and by initiating plans to create branches in Calcutta and Bombay.¹⁵⁹ While representatives of the Air League of India stated that the league had 'no desire to disassociate themselves from the Air League at home', it was suggested that 'political considerations make it essential that we should be an Air League of India' and that the aims and objects of the British Air League had 'no application to India with its different castes, religions, etc.'¹⁶⁰ Given the nature of British rule in India, the Amritsar massacre of 1919 and the rising tide of Indian nationalism, such a stance is hardly surprising. Nonetheless,

while the Air League publicly stressed that it was ‘undoubtedly a wise arrangement that both bodies should exist and that both should co-operate’, certain members stated privately that ‘to speak of an Air League of India was a contradiction in terms for that limited it to a local effort instead of an Empire-wide League’.¹⁶¹ After months of discussion, the Air League informed the Air League of India that it was willing to recognise it as a federated body, ‘but retains the right to form a branch in India or to recognise any other air propaganda organisation which might hereafter be formed in India’.¹⁶²

Despite such difficulties, the Air League had formed branches in Australia, South Africa, Canada and New Zealand by the early 1930s, while it later labelled those associated with the Flying Club of Northern Rhodesia ‘Honorary Overseas Members’.¹⁶³ As international tensions increased in the late 1930s, the Air League’s attention shifted from fostering imperial unity to promoting national and imperial security. In doing so, it urged that ‘we must look, as we looked in the late war, to our Dominions to help us’ and called for an ‘Imperial Air Force’ which would ‘bind the Empire together by common ties’ and ‘fly wing tip to wing tip with the air force of the mother country in days of trouble’.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

In promoting nation and empire, the Navy and Air Leagues made use of written propaganda alongside spectacle, pageantry and popular civic ritual. Conventional methods of dissemination, including newspaper articles, articles in the official organs of each league, public meetings and lectures, were augmented by established and emerging rituals of nation and empire. In seeking to foster national and imperial sentiment, the Navy League drew upon tradition, heritage and the navy’s long-standing centrality to the nation’s status as an island nation. The Air League, meanwhile, was among those who claimed that Britain was no longer an island and sought to champion technological innovation and modernity in the air. Of course, while many felt that the navy remained the ‘Sure Shield’ of the nation and the empire, and that Britain ‘must not risk giving up the command of the sea’, few Britons would have argued with the Air League’s assertion that the aeroplane had ‘annihilate[d] time and space’ and that the ‘conquest of the air has robbed these islands of “splendid isolation” and while providing a new medium of transportation has provided also a new medium of attack. We can no longer afford to think only in terms of maritime strength.’¹⁶⁵

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Chapter 5

Militarism, education and youth

Historians have long pointed to the proliferation of uniformed youth movements as evidence of militarism in Edwardian Britain. However, as in the case of associational bodies concerned with national defence, the First World War often marks a point of rupture for studies exploring the place of militarism within such groups. Adopting such a narrative, John Springhall argues that ‘waves of virulent pacifism and anti-militarism’ after 1918 moved ‘public opinion against the idea of ex-soldiers training the young’.¹ Melanie Tebbutt similarly suggests that the conflict ‘significantly compromised pre-war expectations of “being a boy”’, especially ‘in relation to militarism and the jingoistic expectations of youthful masculinity’.²

Youth organisations were certainly not immune to the post-war spirit of internationalism, pacifism and anti-war sentiment. Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts, for instance, went from ‘an inward looking and decidedly militaristic programme to one which embraced liberal internationalism’.³ Of course, such processes were far from straightforward. As Scott Johnston observes, the Scouts’ post-war internationalism was largely accidental, complex and arduous.⁴ Moreover, as previous chapters have argued, liberal internationalism should not be conflated with anti-militarism. Liberal internationalism developed alongside – and in certain forms embraced – militarism after the First World War.⁵ Nevertheless, internationalism did become a ‘core value’ of the Scouts’ programme and a popular ‘rallying cry for the movement’.⁶ Equally, the post-war growth of woodcraft and pacific groups indicates a move away from the activities and values that characterised many Edwardian youth movements. The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, the Woodcraft Folk Movement and the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry were all peaceable and rural movements

that linked the countryside to citizenship and character-building.⁷ None were mass-membership organisations, but their mere existence indicates a growing distaste towards pre-war, uniformed youth movements that emphasised drill, discipline and duty.

In light of this apparent historiographical consensus – and seemingly inhospitable social, cultural and political environment – one would expect that militaristic, uniformed youth movements would have enjoyed little success in the interwar years. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, such bodies continued to occupy an important place in the youth culture of the post-war years. As its focus, this chapter details the activities of two such organisations – the SCC and the ADCC. Although the ADCC was created in the late 1930s, and might therefore seem a poor subject of comparison with the SCC, numerous other Air League initiatives revolved around promoting an (often militarised) air-mindedness among British youth. Indeed, the league had a long-standing belief that it was ‘through the younger generation’ that the ‘gospel of aviation must be preached’.⁸ Moreover, the two organisations shared many aims, ideas and values. The purpose of the SCC was to recruit boys aged between twelve and eighteen, train them in the habits of discipline, duty, self-sacrifice and seamanship, and to ‘instil into them a love of the Empire and a love of the Navy, on which that Empire absolutely depends for its existence’.⁹ The ADCC, meanwhile, aimed to become an ‘association of all those who have the welfare of their country in the air at heart’ and – by the end of 1939 – it comprised 20,000 uniformed, disciplined, patriotic and knowledgeable boys aged between 14 and 18.¹⁰ Character-building, citizenship and education were important features of both organisations, yet so too was service, discipline, duty and patriotism. However, while the SCC was linked to naval heritage and tradition, the ADCC was associated with modernity, technology and the promise of flight.

While the contribution of young people to interwar cultures of peace has been the subject of increasing scholarly interest, more needs to be done to trace the ways in which young people interacted, engaged with and contributed to interwar cultures of militarism.¹¹ This chapter does so through the lens of two uniformed youth organisations, the SCC and ADCC, paying particular attention to issues including militarism, citizenship, masculinity and British attitudes to war and peace. The SCC and ADCC were used to extol the virtues of sea and air power to state and society, and were directly linked to the Admiralty and Air Ministry, receiving financial, practical and moral support. This connection is important to note. While Johnston (among others) argues that associations between youth organisations and the War Office represented a ‘death knell after the war’, the SCC and ADCC actively sought support from officialdom.¹²

Despite associations with the Admiralty and Air Ministry, the SCC and ADCC remained popular and made notable contributions to the military preparedness of the nation at the outbreak of – and throughout – the Second World War. If youth organisations functioned as ‘extremely sensitive barometers of shifts in public and governmental attitudes towards the military in British society’, then the activities of the SCC and ADCC suggest that public opinion was at least reasonably favourable to militaristic corps designed to protect the nation.¹³

Youth and education

From their inception, both the Navy and Air Leagues devoted considerable energy to youth and education. Prior to the First World War, the Navy League produced handbooks on naval engagements aimed at the ‘British Schoolboy’ and ran essay competitions for children on topics including ‘The Command of the Sea’.¹⁴ The league lectured at public and preparatory schools and established a number of branches in public schools. As Fleming observes, the league’s focus on elite institutions reflected both its class composition and belief that it was reaching future leaders and policymakers.¹⁵ Local branches sought to reach a wider audience among children, engaging in educational activities at elementary schools. However, such efforts occasionally met with resistance from local school boards who objected to the martial nature of Navy League teachings.¹⁶

The Boys’ Naval Brigade (BNB) represented the Navy League’s other principal pre-war endeavour involving youth. Formed from a collection of disparate naval brigades and clubs in late 1910, it was not until the league’s involvement that such brigades had any discernible organisation. Even Navy League officials described the origins of the SCC – the BNB’s successor – as ‘little more than Boys Social Clubs with a salt atmosphere, some emphasis on sea interests, and later a uniform of “naval” character’.¹⁷ The BNB was founded with a view ‘to the establishment of a Central Organisation to deal with the various Companies of Boys’ Naval Brigades’. The BNB’s committee aimed to arrange competitions between brigades, organise meetings and excursions to naval ports alongside providing advice for brigades seeking to obtain uniforms, rifles, boats and instructional equipment.¹⁸ While the BNB was designed to improve discipline among the nation’s youth, this was not the sole motivation for its establishment. Through training boys in practical seamanship, it was hoped that many would join the Mercantile Marine and Royal Navy, which would thereby decrease the former’s dependence

on the 'foreign element', with the league calling for 'British Seamen for British Ships'.¹⁹

Drill, training in seamanship and quasi-military activities formed part of the BNB's early activities. As such, the brigade's leadership was conscious about its militaristic appearance, expressing particular concern over the War Office's objection to "'armed parties" marching through the streets'.²⁰ Although other youth organisations were reluctant to be associated with the War Office, the Navy League quickly attempted to formalise links with the Admiralty and applied for official recognition of its brigades in May 1913. While this was ultimately not granted until 1919, the league declared that the brigade ensured that 'a constant stream of eligible boys pass[ed] into the Navy . . . no better means can be devised for the preparation of a better class of boys for sea service than that which is now afforded' through the BNB.²¹

The BNB played an active role in the First World War, with units acting as messengers, signal boys and coastal watchers.²² Of course, many also applied for service in the Royal Navy. By the end of the conflict, 164 officers and instructors and 3,099 boys of the BNB joined the services.²³ While such figures are not particularly striking, the league took pride in its contribution and memorialised those who died during the conflict by creating a roll of honour.²⁴ For the Navy League, the BNB's contribution suggested that when 'the demand for "British boys for British ships" is remembered, it is obvious that the movement is one which deserves official recognition and public support as a practical national asset'.²⁵ The BNB was finally recognised by the Admiralty as a Central Association in January 1919, formally becoming the SCC.²⁶

As part of the Navy League's post-war reconstruction, even greater emphasis was placed on education and youth. Addressing guests of the league's Nelson Day dinner in 1919, the Duke of Somerset noted that 'perhaps the strangest of all England's peculiarities is the ignorance of English people generally on the subject of its Sea Services and their vital importance to the nation, their history, and their everyday work'.²⁷ The league aimed to 'see that the youth of this country, those who guided the studies of the youth of this country, that those who were in a position of authority at universities and secondary schools, should all appreciate properly the value of the sea to this country'.²⁸ To achieve this, the league ran essay competitions for schoolchildren, lectured in public and elementary schools and arranged trips for schoolchildren to visit the 'great Naval and Mercantile Marine centres'. It also extended its work to universities, holding essay prizes on naval history for university students and calling for the endowment of a chair of naval history at the University of London.²⁹

The inculcation of navalist principles in educational circles was not without opposition. In 1942, *The Navy* recalled with regret that the pre-war SCC was 'denied every facility in the schools controlled by the London County Council, because they were supposed to represent a militaristic tendency'.³⁰ As there were fears that cadet corps in schools had a 'militarising effect' on children, this is perhaps unsurprising.³¹ The ILP was a critic of the Navy League's general propaganda work in schools, while others charged the league with 'spreading political notions of quite remarkable narrowness among preparatory schoolboys'.³² While the league considered such remarks 'vitriolic', it was nevertheless satisfied 'as they showed our lectures were having some effect'.³³

Building upon its work in schools, the Navy League was present at public events aimed at children. One such event was the Schoolboys' Exhibition in 1929 to 1930 and 1930 to 1931, with the *Daily Mail* promising that boys who visited the league's display would be 'thrilled with the might and majesty of British sea-power'.³⁴ A 'great number of boys' took the opportunity to look through a submarine periscope that formed part of the league's stall, in order to 'see the fleet and blow up an enemy ship!'³⁵ Not all observers were so enthusiastic. Commenting on the league's film, *Keep Watch*, the *Daily Herald* wrote that it would be 'unquestionably dangerous in [its] effects on the impressionable minds of the youngsters' and should not only show boys as 'fine strapping youths' but should include those who had been affected by the First World War, particularly the 'disfigured and mutilated'. Such exhibits were not mere 'side shows' or 'amusements', but for the *Daily Herald* were being used to influence the 'potential cannon fodder of the next great war'.³⁶

Like the Navy League, the Air League went to considerable lengths to promote aviation in educational spheres. The league ran essay competitions, provided lectures at schools, colleges and universities, and proposed the formation of a national aeronautical college on several occasions. The WAL further contributed to such activities, establishing scholarships for engineering students wishing to specialise in aviation at the Imperial College of Science and Technology.³⁷ However, the shaping of young aerial minds extended well beyond educational circles. The Young Aerial League, inaugurated in 1910, represented one of the first organisations with the sole purpose of fostering an interest in aviation among British youth.³⁸ Formed under the auspices of the WAL, its object was to 'educate and interest children in all matters of aviation', with lectures, essay prizes, model-drawing and model-building competitions all forming part of its activities.³⁹ Young Aerial League activities were also closely connected to youth organisations such as the Boy Scouts. The Air League invited Scouts to flying meets and races, and persuaded the Scout Association to include

articles on aviators and their exploits in its publications.⁴⁰ A Boy Scout Balloon Club was formed in 1910 and a scheme was placed before the Scouts to form a branch of the Young Aerial League to be named the Boy Scouts' Division.⁴¹ This branch aimed to provide Scouts with basic aeronautical training 'thus enabling them to be of immediate service to their country in case of invasion'.⁴² Like the Young Aerial League, the Boy Scouts' Division was designed to be of value to the nation in any future conflict.

The Air League attempted to consolidate such work by initiating educational schemes in schools and universities after 1918. The league contacted headmasters at a range of public schools (including Eton, Harrow and Westminster), proposing to deliver lectures on aeronautical subjects.⁴³ It also spoke at the Cambridge Union Society, received letters of support from Oxford undergraduates and attempted to secure the backing of the University Air Squadrons at Oxford and Cambridge.⁴⁴ The league even considered establishing a public school for aviation, along the lines of Wellington College, which would have 'an aviation bias, the same way that Wellington had a military bias', although this was ultimately abandoned.⁴⁵

Despite its endeavours, the league's educational activities were frustrated by certain authorities. For instance, when the London County Council (LCC) chose not to adopt *Facts about Flying*, the league thought that this rang of a 'distorted mind . . . obsessed by the principles of pacifism'.⁴⁶ *Facts about Flying* was hardly devoid of ideological content, with the Air League noting that the 'receptive mind of the younger generation . . . is a fertile and virgin soil, in which the germs of the great principles which dominate aeronautics should be planted forthwith'.⁴⁷ The *Daily Herald* similarly recognised the propagandistic nature of the publication, writing that although 'it may be unfair to regard the Air League as already the successor of the Navy League' which preached 'the virtues of steel and gunpowder to young Britain', the 'real essence of militarism' was 'latent' within the pamphlet.⁴⁸

Alongside attempts to interest public schools and universities in aviation, the Air League took part in a number of public exhibitions. The league attended the Aero Exhibition at Olympia in 1929 and, like the Navy League, was present at the Schoolboys' Exhibition in 1927, 1929 to 1930, 1931, 1934, where its section reportedly aroused 'the most interest' of all those present, and again in 1936.⁴⁹ The Air League also had its own junior section from the mid-1930s, with a membership of 4,500 by 1936. However, with the exception of essay, scrapbook, drawing and photographic competitions, little of the league's work was tailored directly towards its young members.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it continued to work with other youth organisations and received numerous requests for lectures

and the provision of model aeroplanes from the Boy Scouts and the Boys' Brigades.⁵¹ Despite this, the league acknowledged that perhaps the most important method of promoting airmindedness among British youth was not in classrooms or lecture halls, but through offering experiences of flight. In 1934, *Air Review* bemoaned that 'younger folk are ill-served' to gain flying opportunities. The article continued, '[b]urning with an enthusiasm foreign to his elders, the boy who has outgrown his aeroplane toys asks nothing but to be allowed to fly'.⁵² To combat this, the league established the Young Pilots' Fund in 1935.

As flying was prohibitively expensive for many, the Young Pilots' Fund was designed to subsidise half the costs for those who wanted to take their 'A' licence at a flying club and gain flying experience.⁵³ To raise funds, the league released an appeal in December 1934 which stressed that Britain's 'safety and progress demand that the rising generation should fly. They want to fly but cannot afford the cost . . . Other Governments are helping the new generation into the air; we must do the same.'⁵⁴ *Air Review* argued that it was not a 'militaristic scheme', although admitted 'no one can deny that the ability to fly will be an asset to the country if war should be forced upon us'.⁵⁵ The fund received financial and moral support from notable figures including Lord Londonderry, in his capacity as secretary of state for air, the Prince of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of York, while the public response to the scheme was substantial.⁵⁶ Hundreds of applications were submitted by January 1935, leading *Flight* to declare that 'aviation has captured the imagination of youth'.⁵⁷

To augment the work of the Young Pilots' Fund, the Air League promoted aeroplane modelling, involving the Skybird League (created to oversee the growth of modelling clubs) in its junior section from 1935.⁵⁸ The league certainly valued the propagandistic elements of modelling, deeming it to be of 'national importance, insomuch as it helps to spread an "air sense"' and that it 'is very often the means, especially in the younger generation, of producing the potential airman of the future'.⁵⁹ However, it was not until the ADCC that the Air League was able to appeal to British youth on a truly nationwide scale.

The Sea Cadet Corps and the Air Defence Cadet Corps

Addressing attendees at an SCC fundraising appeal at the Mansion House, London, Sir George Broadbridge, the lord mayor of London, declared

We must command the seas or perish as an Empire. It was vital that a constant supply of sea-minded young men should be coming forward

generation by generation to take the place of those who had gone before. It was only by the Nelson tradition of patriotism, service, and self-sacrifice that the Empire could be maintained. The Navy League, through its cadet corps, would take a great part in ensuring that that tradition would be preserved.⁶⁰

Other prominent figures in attendance conceived of the corps in similar terms. Sir Thomas Inskip, the minister for co-ordination of defence, remarked that 'I cannot imagine any more British institution than the Sea Cadet Corps . . . in spirit we are all sailors; we all love the sea; we all think of the sea as the element on which the Englishman lives and flourishes.'⁶¹ In elevating the navy into a distinct political symbol – based around the preservation of nation and empire – both speakers signalled that it was, for members of the SCC, something worth fighting for.

In many respects, the aims and activities of the SCC reflected such sentiments. The object of the corps was 'to continue the training of boys just before and after school leaving age, in habits of discipline, duty and self-respect', 'to educate them to love the British Empire and its splendid sea traditions' and to help boys 'desirous of joining the Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine to attain their ambition'.⁶² The league hoped that SCC members would become 'of practical use not only in time of peace but in time of war' and that the training of boys in discipline, duty and self-respect was 'essential for the welfare of the British race and for the continued prosperity of the great Empire which is bound together by the sea'.⁶³ Many within the Admiralty held similar views. By 1924, Beatty felt that the league had already succeeded in 'instilling into the young generation the sea sense upon which the foundations of the Empire were built'.⁶⁴

In addition to offering moral and political support, the Admiralty assisted the SCC financially. Upon recognition of the SCC in 1919, the Admiralty provided a capitation grant of 2s (later 6s) per cadet which the Navy League considered to be of 'immense help' in maintaining the corps.⁶⁵ Official recognition meant that the Admiralty also loaned equipment such as boats, rifles and field guns to the SCC for training purposes. Officers and instructors were granted Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve honorary commissions and were allowed to wear the reserve's uniform, while members of the corps were dressed in attire resembling the Royal Navy's uniform. However, recognition was only granted on a number of conditions. Units had to be financially self-supporting; had to comply with any rules, regulations or orders issued from the Admiralty; had to have a minimum of thirty boys registered; and instructors had to be capable of 'imparting elementary technical instruction to its members

in an efficient manner'. Units then had to pass an Admiralty inspection and thereafter pass at least one inspection annually.⁶⁶

Despite the SCC's value to both the Navy League and the Admiralty, the latter terminated capitation grants in 1924.⁶⁷ Although made in accordance with the War Office's respective withdrawal of financial support to the Cadet Force in 1923, the Navy League urged the Admiralty to reconsider.⁶⁸ However, the decision ultimately lay with the Treasury. The Admiralty was certainly reluctant to terminate capitation grants, as many felt that SCC training 'does much to strengthen the morals of those young lads, instils habits of obedience and discipline . . . and in many cases gives them a taste for a sea career'.⁶⁹ The Admiralty also argued that enthusiasm for the corps would be lost if 'divested of its naval or military character'.⁷⁰ As the capitation grant was restored in 1927, albeit reduced to 3s 6d per cadet, this suggests that the Admiralty saw the value of the SCC in such terms.⁷¹

While the SCC was a nationwide scheme, units were primarily located in London and the south of England until the late 1930s. As the SCC's official organ, *The Sea Cadet*, was not published until 1943, the corps' activities were principally recorded in local and national newspapers and in *The Navy*. Each unit had to reach a standard of efficiency as laid out by the Admiralty, although activities varied based on location, funds, the size of units and the experience of local organisers. Despite such variations, drill, marching, seamanship, rifle training, field-gun training and physical exercise were part of most units' activities.⁷² The SCC Executive Committee also deemed it prudent to provide units with silhouettes of British and foreign warships for identification purposes.⁷³ In addition to regular training, SCC members attended annual camps and training onboard ships such as HMS *Impregnable*, *Implacable*, *Foudroyant* and *Ganges*. Such activities combined adventure, leisure and entertainment with drill, military-style training and mock-combat scenarios.⁷⁴ Alongside this, lectures were delivered to boys on naval history and contemporary naval issues.

The Navy League's Executive Committee was responsible for the SCC's affairs and organisation generally, although the scheme was decentralised and local branches often handled the activities of units in their areas. The administration of the SCC continued in this manner until 1935 when the SCC Sub-Committee was formed, undoubtedly improving the efficiency of the corps' organisation.⁷⁵ As well as funding provided by Admiralty capitation grants, the league depended upon donations, membership subscriptions, flag days and its own Nelson Day Fund. Fundraising schemes received support from members of the royal family

on occasion, although the greatest single contribution came from Lord Nuffield, who donated £50,000 to the corps in 1937.⁷⁶ More potentially controversial sources included armament manufacturers and Lady Houston, the latter of whom donated £5,000 to the SCC, although such contributions seemingly elicited little opposition.⁷⁷

To facilitate training, the league produced the SCC pocket manual which contained information on the discipline expected to be maintained by members, seamanship, signalling, rifle exercises, physical drill, model making, first aid and various other topics. The manual also included the 'Sea Cadet's "Promise"' that members of the corps were required to sign. This was a code of practice by which the cadet would live while serving in the corps. The cadet was required to declare loyalty to the king, officers, instructors and to his fellow cadets. The final 'promise' required the cadet to 'try and follow the glorious example of Nelson and DO MY DUTY'. The league emphasised that while the SCC did not seek to 'force boys into a Maritime career', the manual would provide an 'excellent grounding' for those who wished to join the services.⁷⁸

While the Air League was active in a variety of schemes involving youth, the ADCC was not established until the late 1930s. The corps was initially proposed by Chamier to Sir Donald Banks, permanent secretary of the Air Ministry, in 1937. The aim was 'to give the boys a uniform and discipline' and 'to instruct them in air matters'. Chamier, who felt that the scheme was 'five years overdue', argued that 'volunteer cadets of this kind' would be 'an immense value to the country'.⁷⁹ Initially, the league received no official response from the Air Ministry. Accordingly, it set out the aims of the corps in more concrete terms, writing that the 'main object of this organisation is to bring large numbers of young men between the ages of fourteen and eighteen who would otherwise be deprived of the opportunity into direct contact with aviation'. In doing so, these young men would 'become to a great extent a reservoir of man-power for both Service and Civil aviation'.⁸⁰ From its inception, the military potential of the corps was recognised, with Chamier noting that it would make a 'definite contribution to the security of the country' and that 'we could really aim for numbers of youngsters definitely trained to take an active part should war break out'.⁸¹

The corps quickly gained the backing of many senior politicians, military theorists and the Air Ministry itself. Lord Londonderry supported the ADCC, as did Lord Swinton, who thought the corps would bring 'considerable numbers of young men into touch with aviation'.⁸² Kingsley Wood, Swinton's successor as secretary of state for air, hoped that the corps would 'make some of the present generation knights of the air as their forefathers were conquerors of the sea'.⁸³ This chivalric image of the aviator, and the

promise of the excitement that flying could provide, were constant themes in discussions surrounding the corps. The ethos of the corps – which largely revolved around service, patriotism and duty – linked airmindedness, citizenship and a militarised masculinity among boys.

Like the SCC, the ADCC had squadrons across Britain ranging from Inverness to Land's End.⁸⁴ There were two forms of squadrons: school squadrons, which were drawn from pupils and 'old boys', and open squadrons, which were recruited from local communities. Decentralisation was a key component of the scheme and so the country was divided into eight sections with an area organiser being appointed to each area. Organisers were responsible for visiting the main towns within their areas and contacting mayors, corporations, rotary clubs, chambers of commerce and local gentry to encourage them to establish squadrons.⁸⁵ The ADCC was financed by donations, an Air League central fund of £25,000 – of which £10,000 was donated by Lord Nuffield – and a capitation grant of 3s 6d from the Air Ministry.⁸⁶

The ADCC's Executive Committee, much like the Air League itself, contained many notable political and military figures, as well as ex-servicemen, members of the press and aviation pioneers. Cadets were taught the elementary principles of aircraft engineering and maintenance, the handling of workshop tools and instruments, the general theory of flight, aeroplane identification, morse code, message carrying, meteorology, fire action, and model aeroplane making and flying. Cadets were additionally trained in ARP and given an insight into the working of the Observer Corps, Balloon Barrage companies, anti-aircraft gunnery, searchlight and sound-locator operations, and other forms of 'passive' defence. Each squadron was also given instruction in drill, discipline and physical exercise. Members of the corps wore a uniform that consisted of a blue forage cap, a blue tunic (similar to that of the RAF), trousers, a black belt and chromium badges with the Air League's logo superimposed.

Although the outward and visible signs of the corps were related to the military – drill, discipline, uniform and the organisation into squadrons and parades – this did little to dissuade boys from joining the ADCC. Cadets attended squadrons on Saturdays and at least one week-night. That cadets devoted their leisure time to both the SCC and ADCC is important to note and suggests that, despite shifting leisure patterns and the increasing appeal of popular forms of entertainment such as cinema and dance halls, militaristic corps still had a place within the youth culture of the interwar years. Boys and young men, of course, had agency and for some this meant exercising it by voluntarily joining the SCC and ADCC. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the chance to fly that seemingly provided the greatest attraction for members of the ADCC.

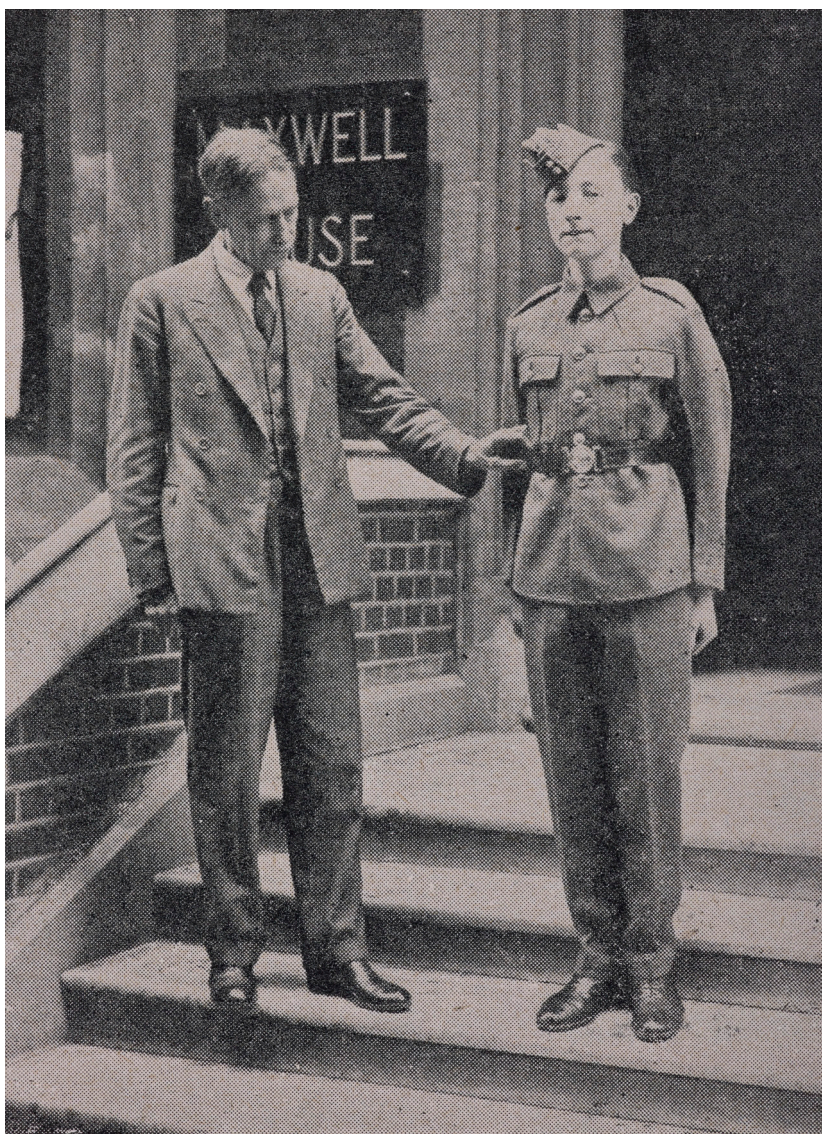


Figure 5.1 Air Commodore Chamier inspecting the new Cadet Corps uniform

In a letter to the Air League's junior section, Chamier wrote that 'I believe that many of you have got the idea that these Air Defence Cadets will all be pilots. I do not want to disappoint you, but it is not possible at this stage to make any definite promises like that.' However, Chamier hoped that around 10,000 cadets would eventually have the opportunity to fly.⁸⁷ To facilitate this, boys were given gliding experience after the British Gliding Association (founded in 1929 to popularise the sport of gliding) allowed 700 ADCC members to fly at camps in the summer of 1939.⁸⁸ The corps' leadership understood the importance of flying for boys, 'because the interest of the Cadets would be likely to sag if they were fed entirely on books and lectures, and were denied opportunities of doing practical flying'. Camps also brought members of the ADCC together for the first time, giving them the opportunity of developing the '*esprit de corps* so necessary for a movement of this nature'.⁸⁹

The ADCC's activities were recorded in *Air Review*. However, such was the popularity of the corps that the Air League created an official organ, *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, which published news and information of general interest to the corps. In addition, the league produced a training manual, which set out the organisation's rules and regulations. The manual emphasised to cadets that they would not be accepted 'unless they show themselves to be in possession of those physical and moral qualities which make them a credit to their country in aviation'.⁹⁰ Like the SCC, members of the ADCC were required to sign a code of practice declaring loyalty to their unit while also 'honouring my King, my Country and its Flag'.⁹¹

Physical culture and masculinity

Discussions surrounding the purpose of the SCC and ADCC were frequently framed in terms of physical culture and masculinity. Speaking in 1937, Lord Lloyd observed that 'it is now being recognised that both training and discipline are essential to the making of what used to be called in Elizabethan days a "proper man"'.⁹² Lloyd further emphasised that members of the SCC 'were not only taught a high standard of discipline and physique but learned at the same time the noble uses to which their perfected bodies and disciplined minds could be put in the service of their fellow men and the land in which they lived'.⁹³ The Navy League had considered a girls' SCC on several occasions, yet it ultimately rejected proposals on the grounds that the Admiralty only recognised Boys' Naval Brigades and male cadet corps.⁹⁴

While the SCC and ADCC attempted to attract members from all classes, the leadership of the former stressed that it was 'very harmful that the Navy League should give the impression that the type of boy they wanted for the Sea Cadet Corps was one off the street . . . only the very best type of boy is wanted.'⁹⁵ Nevertheless, once put in uniform, discipline was seen to follow. *The Sphere* described this process in the following terms: 'In the course of a few months the average Sea Cadet is transformed from the raw material of unkempt urchin into a smart, alert, vigorous young seaman'.⁹⁶ While such transformations may have been exaggerated, life in the corps attempted to improve boys' behaviour, with uniform playing an important part in this.

If the First World War compromised expectations of youthful and martial masculinity, this did not prevent bodies such as the SCC or ADCC from inculcating a military masculinity among boys. The Navy League wanted 'real men of real value' and argued that the corps was 'the best means by which they may pave their way to manliness'.⁹⁷ Of course, as the SCC recruited boys aged twelve to eighteen and the ADCC boys aged fourteen to eighteen, masculinity and calls for 'real men of real value' would have meant different things to boys depending on their age. Unfortunately, there are few archival records relating to the age of either SCC or ADCC members. However, it is clear, based on photographs, newsreels, newspaper articles and reports in *The Navy*, *Air Review* and *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, that the age of cadets varied: each corps was a mixture of boys and young men.

SCC and ADCC training focused on physical efficiency and on preparing boys to contribute to national defence, even if the leadership of each corps emphasised the educational and character-building nature of such training. Emphasis on the quality of boys points to the importance of military efficiency, with SCC units occasionally being rejected for low standards of fitness and training.⁹⁸ Debates surrounding the physical culture of the SCC were, moreover, often imbued with military terminology. Speaking at the East Cowes Unit, Lord Jellicoe, first sea lord of the Admiralty from 1916 to 1918, told his audience that 'if all boys in the country had the same opportunities for improving their physique, that C3 business would vanish and everyone would in time be A1'.⁹⁹

The ethos of the ADCC was similarly tied to concerns regarding the physical condition of the nation's youth. As Peter Adey suggests, 'young people were the susceptible figure upon which a new kind of aerial being could be stamped, and where a new form of aerial and political community could be grown'.¹⁰⁰ Adey describes the training of youth groups involved in aviation as a process involving the inculcation of the air

‘through sets of associated practices of the mobile body which had their own benefits in the training of character and importantly the “capacities” desirable for their militaristic use’.¹⁰¹ In many respects, the corps represented a ‘character factory’ of the airminded and was an important vehicle through which the Air League inculcated forms of aerial militarism.¹⁰² Young people, of course, had agency and did not passively take part in the ADCC, while the corps itself was a voluntary organisation. However, the Air Ministry certainly valued the corps for its potential to create useful, airminded and masculine citizens of the nation.

While Alison Light charted a feminised and domesticated masculinity in response to the First World War in Britain, George Mosse emphasised continuity, particularly in relation to masculinity and militarism.¹⁰³ Rather than a feminised or domesticated masculinity, the masculinity of the SCC and ADCC more closely resembled Sonya Rose’s notion of ‘temperate masculinity’. The leadership of the two corps attempted to engender a masculinity that displayed martial characteristics such as bravery and heroism, although such masculinity had to avoid the hyper-masculinity of fascist youth organisations.¹⁰⁴ Despite this, comparisons were often made between each corps and youth organisations in the dictatorship countries. Reflecting on the efficiency of youth training in Germany and Italy, Lloyd remarked that ‘When I go to those countries and see what marvellous things are being done for every boy and girl under dictatorship, I envy at least that fruit – if no other – of the dictatorships of Europe’. Considering the voluntary system for recruitment in Britain, Lloyd believed that the nation would not

exist as a people very long unless we can train and do for our boys and girls what other countries have done for theirs . . . if they are properly trained, I promise you that you shall see growing up – without the ‘million bayonets’ of Mussolini – as fine a body of young men as will make proud the people of this country.¹⁰⁵

Increasing international tension in the 1930s brought anxieties about the physical condition of Britain’s youth to the fore and, in many respects, resembled questions of national efficiency prior to the First World War. As *The Navy* noted, both Germany and Italy trained ‘all their youth from the very earliest years in the use of arms, in the perfection of their bodily vigour, and in the pursuit of patriotic and exceedingly nationalistic ideals. We must do something of the same or go down to defeat in the event of war.’¹⁰⁶ Such links were also made by sections of the Air Ministry in relation to the ADCC: ‘the phenomenal success of the Air Defence Cadet Corps shows . . . that there is a real demand for a popular youth

movement which would emulate the good side of the Hitler Youth and young Fascists', although it was careful to stress that the corps should avoid 'the pernicious ideology of those totalitarian bodies'.¹⁰⁷

Opening ADCC squadrons in Watford in late 1938, Sir John Salmond, retired marshal of the RAF and ADCC chairman, remarked that

The totalitarian countries have the advantage of only having to press a button and the whole nation sprang to arms, organised and equipped to the last degree. In countries like our own, where freedom of the individual has been so precious to us, the transition from peace to war is a much slower and more hesitating movement . . . The Air Defence Cadet Corps will train you while you are still young to make good this time-lag and to be ready and equipped at a moment's call.¹⁰⁸

By emphasising the voluntary nature of each corps, the leadership of the SCC and ADCC attempted to avoid associations with continental and German forms of militarism – particularly conscription, national service, political repression and state authoritarianism – something disliked by both liberals and many on the political right.¹⁰⁹ As Edgerton notes, 'military service was not seen as a civic duty but an unjust impost on youth, and a danger to freedom'.¹¹⁰ While conscription was antithetical to the development of the warfare state, and to Britain as a liberal democracy, militarism and military service were never far from debates surrounding the SCC or ADCC.

Militarism

Perhaps the most visible connection between the SCC, ADCC and the military was the wearing of military uniform by members of each corps. Uniform was able, or at least intended, to cultivate a military masculinity among boys. As Commander J. Irving, who carried out much work on behalf of the SCC, remarked 'we dress the boy in the uniform of one of his Majesty's seamen, which immediately makes the boy want to play the part of the man'.¹¹¹ While uniform was not necessarily able to 'dupe unruly youths into submission', the symbolic nature of uniform was evident to many.¹¹² As Beverley Nichols warned parents: 'It is essential that you should realize the tremendous importance of the uniform as a war force. You will be falling into a grave error if you regard it as a mere harmless detail.'¹¹³ Uniform contributed to the 'spectacle of military display' in the interwar years and formed part of the 'paradigm of how the military body is envisaged within modern warfare'.¹¹⁴ Although military uniform may have constituted a 'soft' form of militarism, it also undoubtedly

represented an emblem of 'patriotic' militarism. The wearing of military uniform by members of each corps visually signalled the preparation of young bodies for military service.¹¹⁵

Navy League leaders emphasised to boys that, through the wearing of uniform, they were part of an important tradition. Speaking to the SCC's Slough Unit, Sir Roger Keyes told boys

they were really part of the Royal Navy. The uniforms you are wearing are those of the Service . . . That is indeed something that should be a source of pride to you all . . . you are learning the meaning of good comradeship, the meaning of the Service, the tradition of the sea, and that should greatly influence your lives.¹¹⁶

Inspecting the SCC's London Divisions, Chatfield likewise remarked that 'by wearing the treasured uniform of the Royal Navy, you have formed a definite connection with that great Service. No uniform occupies a higher place or commands a greater respect and affection among your countrymen.'¹¹⁷ As both Keyes and Chatfield's speeches indicate, uniform was used to inculcate principles of duty, discipline and a sense of collective identity among members of the SCC.

The ADCC's uniform was similarly used to foster a sense of belonging and identity among members and associated its wearers with the modernity of the RAF. In his study of the flyer during the Second World War, Martin Francis describes how the distinctive blue RAF uniform provided a 'beguiling emblem of the flyer's allure', associated with bravery, heroism and glamour.¹¹⁸ As Adey notes, such an emphasis was placed on the symbolic value of the ADCC's uniform which was linked to 'prestige and bravery' owing to its likeness to the RAF's uniform.¹¹⁹ Although the class composition of the two corps is difficult to measure, the cost of uniform would have been prohibitively expensive for some. One former ADCC member recalled, many decades later, that the cost of his uniform was the equivalent of two weeks' wages and not all would have been willing to pay this.¹²⁰ While there was the potential for the SCC and ADCC to attract criticism for wearing uniform – particularly in working-class areas where the Scouts and Boys' Brigade met with hostility on occasion – the numerous applications to the SCC and ADCC committees for uniform grants from distressed areas indicates that there was certainly a desire among working-class boys to be part of each corps.¹²¹

The aims, objectives and values of the SCC and ADCC were naturally shaped by the Navy and Air Leagues' wider goals and so, from their inception, both corps had a distinctly militaristic character. In debates about militarism and the Scout movement, Springhall argues that 'when Baden-Powell organized his Scout movement he did so with one primary motive

– to prepare the next generation of British soldiers for war and the defence of the Empire'.¹²² In many respects, the same can be said of the SCC and ADCC. As Earl Howe, deputy president of the Navy League, remarked, many thought that by forming the SCC the 'Navy League was doing all it could to encourage militarism. But surely everybody in this country must feel it a duty to try and fit himself to play a useful part if ever the need should arise. That was the finest ambition that as an Englishman one could have.'¹²³

The role of the SCC and ADCC in numerous forms of military pageants, parades and tattoos further points to connections between each corps and the military. The SCC attended important state occasions such as the silver jubilee in 1935 and the coronation of King George VI in 1937. The corps also frequently took part in popular celebrations of the navy including Trafalgar Day, Navy Weeks, the Greenwich Night Pageant, fleet reviews and warship launches.¹²⁴ While such occasions may not have necessarily elicited 'vision[s] of duty and a sense of usefulness to the state' among all boys as organisers hoped, they nevertheless provided many with the 'thrill which comes with military movement'.¹²⁵ Such events offered important opportunities for the Navy League to link youth publicly to the monarchy, nation and navy. As H.T. Bishop, general secretary of the SCC, declared, the parts played by the corps 'on many purely military and naval occasions, have shown their substance in Lord Lloyd's claim that these boys are Britain's answer and the boys' own answer to the Hitler Youth Movement and the Italian Balilla'.¹²⁶ Although such occasions were unlikely to have acted as any particular deterrent to potential aggressors, the corps' leadership clearly saw the SCC as an important instrument of propaganda.

As the ADCC was not formed until 1938, members did not feature in such a broad array of military rituals. They did, however, take part in military parades and marches in towns and cities throughout Britain.¹²⁷ They also contributed to the Air League's celebration of Empire Air Day, selling programmes, drilling, parading and patrolling boundaries.¹²⁸ As Chapter 7 demonstrates, the presence of children and the broader militarisation of youth that formed a part of Empire Air Day led to much criticism.

The militaristic nature of both the SCC and ADCC was evident to many contemporaries. Letters to local newspapers reveal opposition towards the militaristic practices of the SCC, with one considering 'Navy League boys blaring forth martial airs' as a 'menace to peace'.¹²⁹ As we have seen, the Navy League and the LNU clashed on a number of occasions; the education – and potential militarisation – of youth provided a further point of conflict. As Lloyd bemoaned in 1932, wherever the Navy League went 'we find the League of Nations Union opposed to the ordinary doctrine of patriotism'. Referring to the SCC, Lloyd felt that it was the

only organization that is not ashamed of teaching boys to defend their country and to be proud of it . . . There has been for some time past a silly, sentimental idea that there is something to be ashamed of in knowing how to handle a rifle or a gun. You may call it militarism if you like. I call it the cultivation of that national spirit without which every Empire has failed.¹³⁰

This address, described by *The Daily Telegraph* as a ‘vigorous protest against a “sentimental” aspect of anti-militarism’, also attracted the attention of Norman Angell.¹³¹ Angell objected to Lloyd’s suggestion that the LNU ‘teaches indifference to national defence or security’. As an alternative to the competitive building of armaments, Angell instead stressed that the union relied upon international law and collective security and that it was ‘simple distortion to imply that it is the repudiation of national defence’. He concluded by stating that the ‘world has come near to destroying itself through being guided by a certain type of “national spirit”. If it is to save itself, if the nation is to be saved, it must discover by disciplined thought where that spirit has gone wrong.’¹³²

The LNU and its leading members were not alone in referring to the militarism of bodies such as the SCC, with prominent literary figures, including George Orwell, noting that the training of youth for war was a long-standing feature of patriotic organisations. Writing in 1940, Orwell reflected that

Most of the English middle class are trained for war from the cradle onwards, not technically but morally. The earliest political slogan I can remember is ‘We want eight (eight dreadnoughts) and we won’t wait.’ At seven years old I was a member of the Navy League and wore a sailor suit with ‘H.M.S. *Invincible*’ on my cap . . . On and off, I have been toting a rifle ever since I was ten.¹³³

Such views were not confined to provincial newspaper columns, associational groups or literary figures, but were also held by certain government officials. One member of the Treasury considered the SCC part of a number of ‘vile bodies which inculcated militarism in the young’ and suggested that ‘navalism is as reprehensible as militarism’.¹³⁴ The corps’ leadership was certainly conscious of accusations of militarism, insisting that the SCC was ‘not at all militaristic, in the sense particularly opposed by pacifists’ although admitted ‘they do fit boys for the service of the sea in peace or war’.¹³⁵ To assuage such criticism, the Navy League enacted measures including temporarily cancelling field-gun competitions, feeling it was ‘inadvisable to flaunt the militarism of the Sea Cadet Corps in the faces of the moderate pacifists’.¹³⁶



Copyright.

KINGSTON (T.S. "STEADFAST") S.C.C.

Decorated lorry with 12-pounder gun and crew at the Lord Mayor's Show.

London News Agency Photos Ltd.

Figure 5.2 Kingston (TS 'Steadfast') SCC

The ADCC committee was similarly cautious, stating that ‘care should be taken not to antagonise parents by stressing the military aspect of the scheme . . . The Corps was a measure of passive defence against a common danger, and should be presented as such.’¹³⁷ In attempting to distance the corps from associations with militarism, Salmond stated that

When the question of aviation cropped up it was generally the parents who stood in the way. They were nervous for fear their sons would go into a dangerous career . . . It must not be thought that because these boys were trained in a Cadet Corps they were any more liable to military service than boys who had not joined such a corps.¹³⁸

A history of the Air Training Corps (ATC), the ADCC’s successor, also felt that the inclusion of the word ‘defence’ in the title of the ADCC helped to ‘disarm possible criticism that it was a militant or aggressive body’.¹³⁹ However, while one of the declared aims of the league was to ‘interest these boys [in aviation]; not to militarise them’, the corps struggled to distance itself from associations with militarism.¹⁴⁰

The activities of the ADCC did little to assuage growing fears of a militarisation of the country’s youth or that the Air League was attempting to inculcate principles of discipline and militarism within schools. In 1939, for instance, the LCC’s Education Committee refused to give permission to the Air League to form a squadron within one of its secondary schools. This was based on an Education Committee resolution passed in 1935 that cadet corps would not be permitted in secondary schools.¹⁴¹ While most committee members did not disagree with the objects of the ADCC, they felt that their job was to ‘educate the children, and not turn them into soldiers’.¹⁴² However, there was opposition from within the committee regarding the decision. John Hare, an alderman of the LCC, suggested that ‘recent changes in the international situation make it most undesirable that this Committee should hamper our air defences’. Hare went further by remarking that ‘such views as those which the Socialist majority held in 1935 – that Cadet Corps in schools would make youths militaristic – were held only now by “eccentric old women and cranks”’.¹⁴³ The LCC did not rescind its decision, although opposition to the resolution clearly reflected a growing concern about the nation’s security.

Recruitment

As international tensions increased in the late 1930s, questions surrounding the function and purpose of each corps took on renewed urgency. Following the Munich Conference in September 1938, the SCC’s Executive

Committee turned its focus to the role of the corps in the event of war. Shortly after the conference, Bishop reported that various SCC units had enquired how they could best be utilised during any potential conflict. After liaising with Admiralty officials, it was agreed that a roster of cadets aged seventeen and over would be 'made available to the Admiralty who would be glad to accept such cadets for the Sea Service'.¹⁴⁴ Lord Lloyd also ensured that cadets would undertake compulsory service in the Royal Navy, noting that the SCC 'besides supplying a regular stream of recruits for the Sea Services, provides, for the service of the Crown, a body of partially trained young men, available in any emergency'.¹⁴⁵

Duty, loyalty and service were key themes in discussions surrounding the SCC in the late 1930s. An advert published in *The Times* in October 1938 stressed that the 'recent [Munich] crisis has made clear the gaps in our defences. These must be filled . . . it is the purpose of the Navy League Sea Cadet Corps to equip boys for these vital Services; to train them to uphold the age-old traditions of loyalty and duty.' The SCC, the article continued, 'is moulding Britain's sons to be Britain's strength and safety'.¹⁴⁶ There was undoubtedly enthusiasm amongst SCC members to serve the country during periods of emergency.¹⁴⁷ Following Munich, Lloyd described a 'stampede of all our boys who wanted to go and serve the country anywhere during the crisis'.¹⁴⁸ *The Navy* also noted that a large proportion of older SCC members 'at once volunteered for active service'.¹⁴⁹ Many local units volunteered for ARP activities and acted as messengers under the guidance of ARP wardens.

In response to concerns surrounding national defence, the SCC rapidly expanded. In 1938, units more than doubled, with branches spread throughout the country. While over half of SCC units in 1931 were based in London, only a quarter of total units were located in the nation's capital by mid-1938 with that proportion 'diminishing as the movement grows'.¹⁵⁰ By June 1939, the corps had increased to 100 units. In fact, the rate of growth was so high that the Navy League decided to limit its expansion from June onwards to alleviate administrative pressure.¹⁵¹ Such expansion received the Admiralty's support, with Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse assuring the league that the members of the Admiralty 'view its activity with the greatest sympathy and will do everything they can to help it' and that the SCC 'is worthy of the support of the whole country'.¹⁵²

Like the Navy League and the SCC, the Air League viewed the ADCC as integral to the preservation of nation. As a leaflet issued by the corps outlined:

In its eighteen months of existence the Corps has taken about 20,000 youths, inspired them with the ideals of the great flying pioneers, with

the spirit of patriotism, of service, and of mental endeavour that is vital to the continuance of our nation . . . The Air Defence Cadet Corps is the visible expression of Britain's determination to continue its greatness, and of the realisation of the fact that its greatness depends on the mastery of the air by the whole of its young manhood.¹⁵³

Following the Munich Conference, *Air Review* warned 'We can no longer put any faith in princes, proletariats, pacts or pacifists. We must have more aeroplanes, more men to make them and more men to man them.' The appeal concluded by citing the importance of the ADCC, declaring that 'We cannot get peace by wishing for it, or even by praying for it. We must be prepared, and well prepared, to fight for it.'¹⁵⁴ The function and purpose of the ADCC, especially in terms of recruitment, was a constant feature in the rhetoric and discourse surrounding the corps. Unsurprisingly, one of the Air Ministry's primary concerns with the corps was recruitment, as was made clear in a meeting to consider Air Ministry cooperation: 'it has to be borne in mind that our main interest in the Corps, although it has other virtues, is the recruiting aspect'.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, one of the main arguments which persuaded Treasury support was that 'the Corps would instil air-mindedness into the youth of the country, and so stimulate a flow of recruits into the R.A.F.'¹⁵⁶ There was little doubt that the Air League intended the corps to make a direct military contribution to the nation. The league suggested that the corps was of 'incalculable value to the whole foundations of aviation and to the whole idea of patriotic service to the State' and would become a 'powerful agent in ensuring an eventual superiority in the air'.¹⁵⁷

While the ambitions of the Air League and Air Ministry in the creation of the ADCC were clear, this does little to give a sense of the lived experience of life in the corps or motivations for joining such an organisation. For instance, did members of the corps see themselves as 'aerial subjects whose destiny it would be to secure and defend the nation'?¹⁵⁸ While there is little trace of SCC members recording their experiences, a series of letters to *Air Review* – alongside interviews conducted by the Imperial War Museum with former cadets in the late 1990s and early 2000s – gives some indication as to why boys joined the ADCC.

Many letters and interviews expressed an interest in model making, drill and engineering, although the desire to fly was a common theme. Also striking are notions of duty, patriotism and sacrifice. Writing in April 1939, one boy recorded that his reason for joining was that 'last September we were threatened with war. At once I realised that I knew nothing, could do nothing to defend other people or myself. Here came a chance to learn how to defend other people, myself, to serve my King and

country.' Another wrote that he wanted to become 'a useful and worthy member of the Royal Air Force', while yet another declared that 'when we are all trained as pilots we'll challenge any air force in the world'.¹⁵⁹

When asked why they joined the ADCC, one former cadet recalled that he was 'always interested in flying', while another remarked that 'aircraft were the beginning and end of everything for me'.¹⁶⁰ A further interviewee stated that, after the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, it 'was obvious that things were going to get tougher . . . all the youth of the country started to join things. Since I was interested in aeroplanes, I joined the Air Defence Cadet Corps'.¹⁶¹ If there were concerns that the ADCC represented a militarisation of the country's youth, then evidently many boys themselves did not object to the more militaristic aspects of the corps.

Of course, the popularity of each corps, and recruitment for the Royal Navy and RAF more broadly, also relied upon more unofficial sources. Interest in the Royal Navy and RAF was fuelled by a 'pleasure culture' of war, particularly through popular juvenile fiction, magazines and films.¹⁶² While literature may not have been the sole – or even most effective – vector of fostering an enthusiasm for the Royal Navy or RAF, there was still interest surrounding fictional depictions of life at sea and in the air. As Michael Paris notes, that 'young men could still view war as exciting and glamorous was due to the heroic and romantic images of war and violence which had been so much a part of juvenile fiction throughout the inter-war period'.¹⁶³ Those serving in the SCC and ADCC did not have to wait long to experience war.

On Trafalgar Day in 1939, little more than a month after the declaration of the Second World War, Lord Lloyd sent a letter to *The Times*, writing that 'each single member of the Sea Cadet Corps is fully aware of the responsibility which rests now upon him as an individual and upon the corps as a unit for proving that the traditions of the British Navy stand as firm today as when Nelson won his great victories'.¹⁶⁴ The purpose of the ADCC in wartime was set out in a letter from the corps' leadership to squadron commanders in August 1939: 'In view of the tension existing at the present time, we would remind Squadron Commanders of the desirability of placing the services of such Cadets as are available and willing at the disposal of the country'. The letter continued, 'we have now over 17,000 organised and disciplined boys and it would seem obvious that some use should be made of them in time of need'.¹⁶⁵ The league further stressed that should the 'Air Ministry have in mind any specific use for Air Defence Cadets in time of emergency, every endeavour will be made by the Air League to supply them'.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War, the SCC had 9,000 cadets in over 100 units 'in training for the service of their country on the high seas'.¹⁶⁷ However, considerable difficulty was faced in bringing the SCC onto a 'war basis'. Large numbers of officers and instructors were called into service, drill halls were 'commandeered' by military authorities and evacuations and blackouts caused further issues for units. While several units closed, most carried on and continued to hold meetings and training exercises. '[M]any thousands' of ex-cadets were already serving in the Royal Navy or Merchant Navy, while many who were of age within the corps volunteered to serve in the conflict. Boys from SCC units in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia were also serving in dominion naval and mercantile marine services.¹⁶⁸ Those not old enough to join the services carried out extensive work at coastal naval bases and in various activities relating to civil defence.

By September 1939, meanwhile, the ADCC comprised 172 squadrons. Many cadets were employed at RAF aerodromes, unpaid and largely without authority, and were engaged in a number of tasks designed to protect the nation.¹⁶⁹ This included filling sandbags, message carrying, ambulance work, filling machine-gun belts and taking part in ARP activities. Cadets also helped children at local train stations who were being evacuated.¹⁷⁰ While the military preparedness of corps such as the SCC and ADCC may have varied, the character of boys was less doubtful and many exposed themselves to danger throughout the Second World War.

Militarism was a central feature of both the SCC and ADCC – from the aims and rhetoric of each organisation to the practices and policies of both corps. The leadership of each corps emphasised the defensive and passive elements of the two movements and the centrality of education, citizenship and character-building, yet associations with militarism were inescapable. The SCC and ADCC were closely linked with a number of key military figures, and their leadership had a strongly military complexion. The lack of organised opposition to both the SCC and ADCC suggests that, if sections of society were not entirely enthusiastic, most parts of British society were willing to accept the need for the country's youth to be trained in all things related to the sea and air. Both organisations occupied an important position in the youth culture of the late 1930s and, as this chapter has demonstrated, this points to the ongoing resonance of military masculinity, patriotism and militarism. Both the SCC and ADCC represented a militarisation of sections of British youth which continued, and indeed only intensified, throughout the Second World War.

Notes

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- 168. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1939, 5–6.
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Chapter 6

Trafalgar Day: naval heritage, tradition and national commemoration

On 21 October 1895 – the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar – a correspondent for *The Times* lamented that the ‘British nation does not greatly heed its most notable anniversaries, and comparatively few will associate this day with the splendid memories of Trafalgar’. Only a day later, however, the newspaper observed that for the ‘first time for many years’ some attempt had been made to decorate the base of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square. While decorations were ‘somewhat sparse and meagre’, *The Times* did take note of the Navy League’s wreath that bore the simple inscription: ‘To the memory of the hero of Trafalgar’.¹ The decorations placed on Nelson’s Column by the Navy League marked the origin of the annual commemoration of Trafalgar Day. Despite inauspicious beginnings, it was not long until Trafalgar Day was considered a ‘national institution’.²

While the Navy League’s creation of a distinctly navalist public ritual quickly became an important fixture in the nation’s civic calendar, Trafalgar Day has received curiously little attention from historians of modern Britain. For the most part, current scholarship on Trafalgar Day does not extend beyond the outbreak of the First World War.³ Although imperial manifestations of the annual event have received some attention beyond 1918, this is only in passing.⁴ The absence of sustained historical focus on Trafalgar Day is somewhat surprising, especially given the extensive scholarly work on rituals, public commemorations and ‘invented traditions’.⁵ It is also surprising in the context of the ‘new’ naval history of recent decades, in which historians have taken a much greater interest in the socio-cultural aspects of the naval and maritime world.⁶ This chapter offers the first comprehensive account of the annual celebration

of Trafalgar Day from the late nineteenth century through to the outbreak of the Second World War.

From its inception, Trafalgar Day provided the Navy League with a platform to construct naval and national identity and to impress upon audiences the importance of sea power on a local, national and imperial scale. Celebrations of Trafalgar Day went far beyond Nelson's Column, with numerous towns, villages and cities observing the event throughout both Britain and its empire. The Navy League was not, however, the only organisation to engage with popular civic ritual in this period. A range of associational bodies and non-state actors utilised a variety of parades, pageants, plays, days of remembrance and other displays to communicate a broad range of educational, commemorative, political and propagandistic ideas. The LNU, for instance, used pageantry to propound liberal internationalist ideals following the First World War, believing that spectacle and theatre was an important 'medium of education for peace'.⁷ Conversely, civic ritual was utilised to foster imperial and patriotic sentiment, particularly through the annual celebration of Empire Day. The service departments also engaged in popular forms of military theatre in the post-war period, including the RAF Display at Hendon, the Army's Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo and the annual celebration of Navy Weeks at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham. This chapter accordingly locates the commemoration of Trafalgar Day within the broader civic ritual of the period, exploring how the Navy League used public ritual to communicate key ideas of naval heritage, nostalgia and tradition. In doing so, it argues that the presence and vitality of Trafalgar Day in interwar commemorative practices challenges Anne Summers's assertion that 'the manufactured ritual' of Trafalgar Day 'struck few chords'.⁸

Trafalgar Day highlights that the 'cult of the navy' – the ways in which the navy and the sea were celebrated prior to 1914 – was able to flourish in the post-war period. Although lacking the spectacle and pageantry of fleet reviews and warship launches, Trafalgar Day represented a 'naval theatre' in which 'tradition, power and claims to the sea' were demonstrated to domestic and foreign audiences alike.⁹ Yet, while fleet reviews and warship launches were distinctly modern in nature, Trafalgar Day allowed members of the public to interact, engage with and reflect upon the history and heritage of Britain's navy. In charting the evolving nature of Trafalgar Day, this chapter explores how popular forms of navalism were reconstituted and promoted following the First World War. While permanence and continuity were key themes of the annual event, the First World War significantly altered the meaning of Trafalgar Day. Despite its shifting nature, Trafalgar Day remained a crucial vehicle through which to

remind audiences of Britain's rich naval heritage – and status as an island nation – after the 'crucible' of conflict.¹⁰

Origins and invention

At the suggestion of Arnold White, the league first placed a wreath on Nelson's Column on 21 October 1895.¹¹ This modest, ephemeral tribute – which commemorated Britain's victory over the combined French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar – had much deeper resonance. Indeed, reflecting on the first Trafalgar Day, White later wrote that 'popular support which cannot easily be gained by academic controversy, may generally be secured by linking a great idea to a great personality'. 'So Nelson's life and death', he continued, could be 'utilised to personify British Sea Power to the children, if not to the veterans, of British democracy throughout the world . . . Everything that emphasises the fact that England lives on a foundation of Sea Power exerts a healthy influence on national life and character.'¹²

Nevertheless, the Navy League's commitment to Trafalgar Day – and to the promotion of naval heritage more broadly – has been the subject of some debate. Barbara Tomlinson suggests that, following the first Trafalgar Day, it 'subsequently became popular nationwide but the League regarded this involvement with heritage as a distraction from its contemporary political objectives'.¹³ Marianne Czisnik similarly describes Trafalgar Day as one of the 'greatest non-political attractions' of the league.¹⁴ Yet, politics and the promotion of naval heritage were closely entwined.

Trafalgar Day was an essential – and often highly politicised – vehicle for the promotion of league propaganda and an important ritual of legitimation for the league itself. Following Trafalgar Day in 1896, the league held a meeting to consider how it could benefit from annual celebrations, deciding to expand its activities alongside *The Navy League Journal*.¹⁵ Nelson formed a central part of the visual iconography of Navy League literature, with the league's crest bearing his image and famous clarion call: 'England expects that every man will do his duty'. The league used the 'invented tradition' of Trafalgar Day not only to expound its own political objectives, but also to promote sea-mindedness to children and adults alike. The league's use of the past, and of Britain's naval heritage, was crucial for the construction of naval and national identity.

While the first Trafalgar Day commemorations were modest and crowds somewhat sparse, there had been no regular habit of celebrating Trafalgar Day outside the Royal Navy until 1895.¹⁶ Following the first Trafalgar Day, the scale of celebrations rapidly increased. The following

year, *The Navy League Journal* expressed satisfaction that the ‘hundreds of thousands’ of visitors to Nelson’s Column had shown that ‘Britons do care, that they have not forgotten, that they are still capable of devotion and self-sacrifice. Trafalgar – the very name, with its stirring associations, is a trumpet-call to the nation to do its duty.’ While the journal admitted that many simply came to observe, it argued that the majority were ‘pilgrims, rather than mere spectators’ who realised that ‘the British Navy still regards Nelson as its chosen hero’.¹⁷ *The Times* similarly reported that celebrations were marked by an ‘extraordinary manifestation of public interest and of patriotism’ and that celebrations represented ‘widely-spread enthusiasm for a great hero of the past’.¹⁸ Some estimated that over half a million people saw the decorations on Nelson’s Column that year.¹⁹ Commemorations seemingly traversed class boundaries, with crowds comprising ‘every class of her Majesty’s subjects, from the Peer and member of Parliament to the street gamin’.²⁰ Given the popularity of early Trafalgar Days, it is perhaps unsurprising that many saw the commercial possibilities of the annual event. There was a considerable sale by hawkers of literature relating to the battle and Nelson, particularly facsimiles of the Trafalgar number of *The Times* and Robert Southey’s *Life of Nelson*, as well as a range of other souvenirs and ephemera including buttons, handkerchiefs and postcards.²¹ The broad range of commemorative material culture produced – and the consumption and collection of such artefacts – further points to the popularity of the annual event.

Trafalgar Day celebrations received widespread support from both national and local newspapers. *The Morning Post* suggested that the Navy League should be congratulated on the ‘complete success’ of commemorations. *The Liverpool Mercury*, meanwhile, lamented Britain’s general neglect of anniversaries as ‘almost criminal’, although praised the Navy League for ‘rescu[ing] one of the most notable of our national triumphs from virtual oblivion’.²² As such comments suggest, the commemoration of Trafalgar Day invested early Navy League activities with the ‘authority and weight of tradition’.²³

Despite extensive praise, the annual event was not without opposition. In commemorating Trafalgar Day, the Navy League stressed that the object was not to celebrate ‘triumph over former foes, but recognition of the principles of duty and courage personified in the life and death of Nelson’.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Increased Armaments Protest Committee – which represented ‘a large number of reformers and lovers of peace’ – warned the public against the league’s use of Trafalgar Day for promoting increased armaments and the ‘general purposes of jingo Imperialism’. The author Arthur Conan Doyle – later a member of the IML – similarly

felt that it would be 'unchivalrous to exult over a beaten foe', suggesting that the Navy League instead name Nelson's birthday 'Nelson Day'.²⁵ The playwright George Bernard Shaw went further, arguing that rather than decorating Nelson's Column, the league might be best advised to pull it down.²⁶ As Shaw's ties with the Fabian Society and Conan Doyle's imperialist sentiments suggest, the meaning and significance of Trafalgar Day was contested by individuals and organisations from across the political spectrum.

Such protests had little impact on the form of Trafalgar Day, although the league did feel the need to publicly respond. Letters appeared from prominent Navy League figures in national newspapers, while *The Navy League Journal* declared:

to those who would forget Trafalgar and erase its lesson from the nation's heart, we can say nothing. They are beyond reminders and reproofs. They had better emigrate to some distant island of the Southern Seas, where, safe from war's alarms and the exhilarating call of national duty, they can live the life of a tame rabbit in its hutch.²⁷

Clearly conscious of French sensibilities, however, the league decided from 1900 to dedicate a wreath to French and Spanish sailors who died fighting at Trafalgar.²⁸

Trafalgar Day commemorations marking the centenary of the conflict in 1905 enjoyed particular resonance. Alongside the customary lavish wreaths and tributes at Nelson's Column, a service including prayers, a reading of Rudyard Kipling's 'Recessional', the playing of Brahms's *The Death of Nelson*, the sounding of the *Reveille* and a rendition of the national anthem was arranged. Other events included a 'patriotic musical celebration' in the Royal Horticultural Hall, a Nelson centenary dinner and a religious service the following day.²⁹ Despite this, the patriotic elements were somewhat muted – following the entente cordiale agreement in 1904 – to avoid offending Britain's new ally, France.³⁰ As the league's annual report noted that year, it was 'above all things, essential to avoid wounding, in any way, the susceptibilities of our friends across the Channel'.³¹ The league was seemingly successful in its endeavours. As *The Times* wrote, the day was marked by a spirit of 'solemn gratitude' rather than the celebration of 'triumph over fallen foes'.³² Despite the reduced pageantry, there was undoubtedly something of the 'cult of the centenary' surrounding celebrations in 1905.³³ For example, it was estimated that up to 100,000 people were in Trafalgar Square in the afternoon, while *The Navy League Journal* reported that queues for Nelson's Column reached nearly three miles in length.³⁴ Prince Edward was among those present, reportedly rising from his carriage to salute



[Photo Fradelle & Young.]

THE NELSON COLUMN, TRAFALGAR CENTENARY DAY, OCTOBER 21, 1905.

Figure 6.1 The Nelson Column, Trafalgar Centenary Day, 21 October 1905

the column. The short trip round the column took approximately an hour and twenty minutes.³⁵

Ceremony, ritual and commemoration

The principal form of commemoration on Trafalgar Day was the decoration of Nelson's Column. Located in Trafalgar Square in the heart of the nation's capital, Nelson's Column was completed in 1843 after several years of construction. Reaching 169 feet in height, the symbolic value of the column was unmistakable; for many, it represented the 'ultimate expression of global maritime power'.³⁶ Sanctioned by the Office of Works, the column on Trafalgar Day was 'encircled from top to bottom by a winding chain of laurel leaves'. A spiral garland was hung in festoons over each side of the square which was carried and entwined round the heads of the Landseer lions.³⁷ Red, white and blue ensigns were often flown, alongside the Union Jack, while the column was illuminated by searchlights in the evening. The scale of early decorations was certainly impressive. In 1899, one newspaper estimated that around fourteen and a half tons of laurel were used to decorate the column.³⁸ Alongside decorations organised by the Navy League's central office, numerous wreaths and floral tributes were laid at the column's base by domestic and overseas Navy League branches, descendants of men who fought at Trafalgar, members of the public, and various schools and youth organisations. Inscriptions were chiefly dedicated to the spirit and legacy of Nelson. The Navy League's own wreath initially bore the inscription: 'To the immortal memory of Nelson'. From 1900, this was accompanied by the message: 'Respect and homage to the memory of the gallant sailors of France and Spain, who fell fighting at Trafalgar' and later with the league's motto: 'Keep Watch'.³⁹ While such decorations were reportedly 'universally admired' and 'could hardly have been more effective and striking', decorations were largely confined to the column's base and plinth from 1900.⁴⁰

Complementing the decoration of Nelson's Column, a range of other commemorative traditions were initiated by the league. For instance, a chaplet of bay leaves and other wreaths were placed at the foot of Nelson's tomb in St Paul's Cathedral. This was invariably done by the wife of either the league's president or secretary. This was the main role that women played in the commemorative process on Trafalgar Day, although women of the league (albeit unenthusiastically) later bore responsibility for flag-day collections.⁴¹ The league also requested that municipal authorities hoist flags on public buildings to accompany increasingly popular regional celebrations of the annual event. Flown at Trafalgar Square and

on Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*, was Nelson's 'England Expects' signal. Commemorations on the *Victory* were not a Navy League initiative and, in fact, took place long before the league's annual celebration at Trafalgar Square.⁴²

As part of Trafalgar Day commemorations, a religious service was held each year at churches including St Martin-in-the-Fields, St Bartholomew the Great and St Paul's Cathedral.⁴³ The sermons would frequently address Britain's naval position and evoke the spirit and legacy of Nelson and Trafalgar. An annual Trafalgar Day or 'Nelson Day' banquet was also held, which was attended by hundreds of influential figures including dominion statesman, foreign ambassadors, prominent British politicians, members of the royal family, Admiralty representatives, delegates of the British and dominion Navy Leagues and members of the press. Each year a toast was made to the 'memory of our great and immortal hero, Nelson'.⁴⁴ By the outbreak of the First World War, the main commemorative traditions of Trafalgar Day had been established: the decoration of Nelson's Column, the tribute at Nelson's tomb, a religious service, an annual banquet and the decoration of the *Victory*. Throughout the First World War, however, the form and ceremony of Trafalgar Day changed to reflect broader shifts in commemorative practices.

Trafalgar Day and the First World War at sea

Arrangements for Trafalgar Day were significantly modified after the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. The annual banquet was cancelled and no lavish decorations were displayed on Nelson's Column. Instead, the league suggested that the flags of Britain's allies should be hoisted on public buildings, that schools should give lectures on Nelson and the navy and that committees should be formed in towns and villages to care for the dependents of men at sea. Finally, the league urged that during wartime, Trafalgar Day should be utilised for the 'especial object of concentrating public thought upon the incalculable blessings which have been conferred upon this nation, and upon the British Empire as a whole, through our supremacy at sea' and to 'stimulate interest in the minds of the masses of the people in the welfare of officers and men of the fleet'.⁴⁵

In 1914, despite the muted pomp and pageantry, Trafalgar Day drew vast crowds. On the eve of Trafalgar Day, there was already an 'unending silent procession' passing by Nelson's Column.⁴⁶ On the day itself, one observer doubted whether such crowds had ever been seen on any previous anniversary.⁴⁷ Commemorations and tributes at Nelson's

Column that year certainly suggest that 'the minds of the masses' needed little encouragement to reflect upon the welfare of those serving at sea during the war. As *The Manchester Guardian* wrote, multitudes gathered 'not only to pay simple homage to an historic name and tradition but to do honour to the memory of those who have died in another and a greater conflict'. Nelson's Column was no longer solely a 'symbol of a grand tradition but of a nation's spirit'.⁴⁸ Trafalgar Day offered a source of unity for families, communities and even the nation throughout the conflict.

In 1914, instead of the usual festoons and laurels, floral tributes were largely dedicated to those who perished in ships lost during the first few months of war. Tributes were made to HMS *Amphion*, *Aboukir*, *Cressy*, *Hogue*, *Pathfinder*, *Pegasus*, *Speedy* and the submarine HMAS *AE 1* alongside wreaths to the memory of 'the brave men who have been lost in trawlers and auxiliary ships while engaged upon duties relating to the defence of the country'.⁴⁹ For three days prior to 21 October, the column was roped in so that the relatives of men who had died at sea were able to place their own wreaths. Among the many wreaths and floral tributes were messages from 'bereaved mothers and sorrowing widows', siblings and from 'women to their lovers, "in sorrowful and affectionate pride"'.⁵⁰ One wreath, dedicated to Alfred Muskett, who died on HMS *Hogue*, bore the inscription: 'In loving memory of my dear sweetheart asleep in the North Sea', while another was devoted to 'our dear brother, Philip Henry Ford', who lost his life in the sinking of HMS *Pathfinder*, from 'his heart-broken sisters'.⁵¹ As commemorations became increasingly linked with the First World War at sea, personal and familial connections with the annual event correspondingly grew. Distinct from pre-war commemorations, Trafalgar Day in wartime was marked by more immediate solemnity, sorrow and grief.

The commemoration of ordinary sailors on Trafalgar Day in wartime reflected broader shifts in commemorative practices and was part of a wider 'democratization of death'.⁵² The commemoration of those who lost their lives at sea was a feature of each Trafalgar Day throughout the First World War. In 1915, a ten-foot wreath of white chrysanthemums, heather, lilies and asparagus fern was dedicated to officers and men of HMS *Bulwark*, *Formidable*, *Irresistible*, *Ocean*, *Goliath*, *Triumph* and *Majestic*. Another tribute was dedicated to those who served at the Battle of Coronel, where 1,569 officers and men died after the sinking of HMS *Good Hope* and *Monmouth*.⁵³ In 1916, Trafalgar Day celebrations were devoted to the officers and men of the fleet 'for their brilliant achievement in the Battle of Jutland . . . and for the incalculable services which our sea power has rendered to civilization and liberty since the beginning of the war'.⁵⁴ For many, Nelson's Column had been 'transformed into a war

shrine, noble and beautiful beyond all comparison'.⁵⁵ Wreaths and flowers once solely dedicated to a national icon were now seemingly primarily placed in memory of officers and ordinary sailors.

While Trafalgar Day in wartime provided a space for families and friends to commemorate their loved ones, it was not solely British officers, sailors and ships that were remembered. Instead, wreaths were also dedicated to French sailors serving in the First World War. Furthermore, in 1916, at the suggestion of Arnold White, the league decided to change the title of commemorations from 'Trafalgar Day' to 'Nelson Day'. 'Jutland Day' had been considered, however it was felt that 'Nelson Day' would best express the 'warmest friendship with France' and 'increase the interest of the British people in the sea power of the Empire which is personified in the name of Nelson'.⁵⁶ In fact, both Nelson Day and Trafalgar Day were used almost interchangeably by both the Navy League and the press, however the league was increasingly conscious of French attitudes and aware that the significance of Trafalgar had perhaps been superseded by more recent naval encounters.

Beyond commemoration and remembrance, two other aspects of Trafalgar Day throughout the First World War are worthy of attention: education and recruitment. The Navy League made a concerted effort to instil the lessons of Trafalgar and the First World War at sea to school-children. In 1915, for example, educational authorities in 236 districts requested that headteachers in public elementary schools devote half an hour to a 'discourse on the achievements of the British Fleet' during the First World War, with approximately 27,000 schools in England, Wales and Scotland reportedly delivering such addresses.⁵⁷ Such endeavours were commonplace on Trafalgar Day throughout the conflict. Lessons were given on subjects including 'What England owes to the sea' and the 'Story of the Battle of Trafalgar'. Children saluted the Union Jack and sang the national anthem, while some schools even held Trafalgar Day matinees. At a school in Catton, Northumberland, 'children gave patriotic speeches and sang patriotic songs', teachers 'pointed out to them the importance and meaning of such a celebration to every English boy and girl', with proceedings drawn to a close by the singing of the national anthem and three cheers for the king and Britain's allies.⁵⁸ Although it is difficult to measure how such lessons were received, one newspaper was in little doubt that they 'could not fail to stir the youthful imagination, and instil the minds of the boys and girls with something of the dauntless spirit and devotion to duty of England's unforgettable hero'.⁵⁹

Prior to the introduction of conscription in early 1916, Trafalgar Day in wartime was characterised, at least in part, by patriotism, duty and recruitment efforts. In 1914, Nelson's Column was flanked with hoardings

'carrying [an] appeal to the patriotism of the nation', including a message from King George V declaring: 'We are fighting for a worthy purpose, and we shall not lay down our arms until that purpose has been achieved'.⁶⁰ Trafalgar Day was reportedly celebrated the following year with a 'spirit of patriotic fervour', with '[h]undreds of thousands of English people' visiting Nelson's Column. *The Manchester Guardian* suggested that the event was 'mainly a recruiting rally' and that crowds were not allowed to 'admire in peace the giant lions with wreaths in their mouths . . . there were recruiters on every plinth shouting a summons to duty'.⁶¹ In 1915, the league itself also encouraged members to devote their energy on Trafalgar Day to recruitment campaigns.⁶² Perhaps the greatest stimulus in terms of recruitment, however, was the death of Edith Cavell, the British nurse who had been executed by a German firing squad in German-occupied Belgium only nine days previously. At the Trafalgar Day service that year, the Bishop of London wondered 'what Nelson would have said if he had been told that an English girl had been shot in cold blood'. He felt Nelson 'would have made more than the diplomatic inquiries which have been made by a great neutral into this crime . . . he would have made his inquiries by the thunder of the guns of the British Fleet.' He furthermore suggested there was no need for a recruitment campaign, feeling that the execution of Cavell was enough.⁶³

Throughout the conflict, Trafalgar Day was supported by numerous figures from the social, political and military elite. The league received messages from King George V, Arthur Balfour, Winston Churchill, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Jellicoe, Beatty and a range of other figures.⁶⁴ Although there was less pomp and ceremony surrounding Trafalgar Day celebrations in wartime, the event remained a key part of the Navy League's activities and was imbued with ever-increasing reverence. Messages championing Nelsonian qualities of duty, discipline and self-sacrifice remained, but were increasingly accompanied by highly personalised messages of loss. Nelson's Column became a public repository for both individual and collective mourning.

Local commemoration

While Nelson's Column naturally provided a focal point for Trafalgar Day commemorations, the annual event was celebrated in villages, towns and cities throughout Britain and beyond. In Britain, Trafalgar Day was particularly popular in coastal locations, as well as port and shipping communities such as Portsmouth, Bristol, Liverpool and Newcastle. Trafalgar Day provided an opportunity for forms of commemoration

devoted to the navy and the nation, yet provincial celebrations were also important in fostering civic pride. While most Trafalgar Day commemorations were organised by Navy League branches, municipal authorities, schools, dignitaries and local societies often staged events without pressure from the league. Provincial newspapers also covered the event – both smaller, regional celebrations and Navy League activities in London – in great detail. As local celebrations suggest, there was undoubtedly a desire within communities to actively engage with navalist public ritual. Exploring these local forms of commemoration is crucial for gauging Trafalgar Day's popularity and for providing a sense of the event's scale and geographical reach. Moreover, it is important to shift the focus from the purely 'national and grandiose to the particular and mundane'. As Jay Winter argues, 'great national sites of remembrance are exceptional, and their histories provide a misleading impression of thousands of others'.⁶⁵

Reflecting national forms of commemoration, wreaths were placed on Nelson's Monument at Portsdown Hill in Portsmouth on Trafalgar Day, with ceremonies being held to mark the occasion. From late 1920, Portsmouth also staged Trafalgar Orphan Fund procession pageants and flag days. These events were organised by a lower-deck committee and aimed to raise money for orphans of naval men who had died in the First World War. However, it was Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*, that was the main site of Trafalgar Day commemorations in Portsmouth. Laurel wreaths were suspended from *Victory*'s masts, a wreath was placed on the spot where Nelson suffered his fatal wound, Nelson's 'England Expects' signal was hoisted while the *Victory*'s anchor on Southsea Front was also decorated.⁶⁶ For many, the value of the *Victory* in Trafalgar Day commemorations was clear: the ship represented a 'lasting symbol of the Nelson spirit, and all that it stands for in the sea service of Great Britain'.⁶⁷

The Society for Nautical Research's post-war *Victory* restoration campaign, launched on Trafalgar Day in 1922, provides further indication of the significance of Trafalgar Day in Portsmouth. Established by Admiral Frederick Charles Doveton Sturdee, the society's president, the campaign sought to raise funds to restore *Victory* to its 'condition at Trafalgar'.⁶⁸ As part of fundraising efforts, the society requested support from the Navy League, although the latter felt unable to provide financial assistance.⁶⁹ The league did, however, publish appeals for the *Victory* fund in *The Navy*, while local branches assisted the society in publicity efforts.⁷⁰ The *Victory* appeal was not simply about preserving the physical remnants of Nelson's ship; as Don Leggett notes, the campaign sought to 'memorialize a moment in British history when sea power was at its height and the British Empire was securely guarded'.⁷¹ The campaign also played an

important role in post-war commemorative culture with the *Victory* acting as a memorial to the navy, nation, empire and those who lost their lives at sea during the First World War.⁷² Much like the annual commemoration of Trafalgar Day, the *Victory* restoration campaign sought to preserve and promote Britain's rich naval heritage.

As in London and Portsmouth, members of the Navy League and various other naval organisations attended Trafalgar Day celebrations at the local Nelson Monument in Liverpool. The monument was draped and decorated with wreaths and laurels under the auspices of the Liverpool Branch of the Navy League. Commemorations often included an inspection of a gathered naval detachment by the Lord Mayor before an address extolling the 'bravery and patriotism of the hero of Trafalgar'. The ceremony invariably ended with three cheers for king and country followed by a rendition of the national anthem.⁷³ As at Nelson's Column, post-war commemorations – particularly those in the 1920s – were dedicated in part to sailors who died during the First World War. In 1927, for instance, members of the public were invited to place a wreath in 'memory of friends lost at sea in the services of their country'.⁷⁴

Accompanying commemorative events in Portsmouth and Liverpool, Trafalgar Day celebrations were particularly popular in the North East of England. Admiral Lord Collingwood, second-in-command at Trafalgar, was born in Newcastle upon Tyne and so the popularity of commemorations at Collingwood's Monument in nearby Tynemouth and in Newcastle itself is perhaps unsurprising. It was claimed that the region had 'every reason to feel proud of the part taken by men of the North in securing for England her greatest naval victory' and that 'there was no more suitable place [than Tynemouth] for Trafalgar Day commemorations'.⁷⁵ Following the formation of the Navy League's Northumberland Branch in 1923, Trafalgar Day commemorations in the North East became an annual event.⁷⁶ In Newcastle, the lord mayor placed a laurel wreath on the Collingwood Monument in St Nicholas's Cathedral and at the bust of Collingwood at Milburn House.⁷⁷ Commemorations in Newcastle were, on occasion, also attended by descendants of Lord Collingwood. At Tynemouth, a public procession was held before a wreath was placed at the foot of the Collingwood Monument. This was often followed by a service by the vicar of Tynemouth. Youth bodies such as the SCC, Boy Scouts, Guides and Boys' Brigade all took part in Trafalgar Day celebrations, while essay prizes on the subject of Collingwood were organised for local schoolchildren. Commemorations at the Collingwood Monument frequently ended with the *Last Post* and the *Reveille*, before a rendition of the national anthem. In later years, the monument was illuminated by a searchlight.⁷⁸

A range of other Trafalgar Day commemorations were held in Norwich, where Lord Nelson's statue was decorated, in Plymouth, where officers and men of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines paraded, and in Bristol, where the local Navy League branch arranged viewings of naval films for thousands of schoolchildren each year.⁷⁹ In Leeds, services and parades were held in the City Square, wreaths were placed on the local war memorial and proceedings were drawn to a close with the singing of *Rule, Britannia!*⁸⁰ The commemoration of Trafalgar was not, however, an exclusively English phenomenon. In Edinburgh, the occasion was marked – mainly under the auspices of the local Navy League branch – by the placing of wreaths on the Nelson Monument at Calton Hill, the flying of Nelson's signal and a short ceremony.⁸¹ In Cardiff, parades, religious services and banquets were held, while Trafalgar Day dinners were a feature of celebrations in Belfast.⁸²

Navalist public ritual clearly enjoyed resonance far beyond the purely national level. Newsreel footage of Trafalgar Day celebrations highlights that local newspaper reports boasting high attendance figures were hardly exaggerated.⁸³ It was not just littoral communities that commemorated Trafalgar Day; it was celebrated in a variety of towns, villages and cities – in places with strong ties to Nelson and Trafalgar and in places without. The commemoration of Trafalgar Day was a nationwide (and indeed global) event. Although many local forms of commemoration often mirrored national Trafalgar Day celebrations, regional commemorations were important for the expression of civic pride and local patriotism.

The Navy League and naval theatre

Beyond Trafalgar Day, the Navy League contributed to the 'cult of the navy' in a variety of other settings. As Rüger reveals, the league took an active interest in pre-war naval theatre – both as a promoter and a participant. The league organised excursions to fleet reviews and ship launches, advertised these events in its official organ and even produced souvenir programmes for several fleet reviews.⁸⁴ These lavishly illustrated guides provided an overview of proceedings and contained articles on the aims and objects of the Navy League, the history of naval reviews, the importance of the navy to Britain's island status and its empire, and pieces lobbying for increased naval spending.⁸⁵ Although the Navy League was unable to shape the form or character of naval theatre, at least in terms of fleet reviews and warship launches, it undoubtedly recognised the importance of theatre and pageantry as a way to engage the British public with the navy.⁸⁶ As displays of military strength and prestige, naval

theatre represented visual and symbolic manifestations of the navalism preached by the Navy League. For the league, the message of such displays was straightforward: 'if you wish for peace, be prepared for war'.⁸⁷

Following the First World War, the Navy League continued to promote naval theatre. In 1923, the league called for the 'institution of a Navy Day throughout the British Empire'. This proposal initially received support from the Admiralty, who found the scheme 'most acceptable', although it later informed the league that 'it was impossible to co-operate as suggested'.⁸⁸ While the Admiralty rejected the Navy League's proposal, it nevertheless staged 'Navy Weeks' only a few years later. Held from 1927 to 1938, Navy Weeks were 'at home' days where members of the public were permitted entry into naval dockyards at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham.⁸⁹ Although the Navy League was not directly involved in the event, organisers did seek the league's assistance for publicity and propaganda.⁹⁰ *The Navy* subsequently advertised the annual event and produced detailed articles outlining the organisation and purpose of Navy Weeks, while senior Navy League figures also wrote descriptive articles on Navy Weeks for other publications.⁹¹ In return, the league was granted free advertising space in Navy Week programmes, with Portsmouth and Chatham additionally ordering copies of *The Navy* to sell to attendees.⁹²

While Navy Weeks provided the league with a valuable form of self-promotion, the league also arranged excursions for local schoolchildren to attend the event, continuing 'its work of interesting and informing the younger generation of the British Navy'.⁹³ Members of the league's SCC frequently visited Navy Weeks on one-day excursions or while at annual camp.⁹⁴ HMS *Victory* was reportedly a particular draw for cadets, although boys were 'profoundly interested' by 'a demonstration of working the big guns' onboard HMS *Barham*.⁹⁵ For *The Navy*, such enthusiasm confirmed that the 'love of things maritime was in the blood of the youngsters'.⁹⁶ Local SCC branches also participated in a number of ship launches in this period. Members of the Sunderland SCC attended the launch of the battleship HMS *King George V* in 1939, while the Barrow SCC formed a guard of honour at the launching of HMS *Greyhound* and *Griffin* in 1935.⁹⁷

The presence of youth at such displays was not without opposition. For instance, the LNU's General Council resolved in 1927 that 'in view of the urgent necessity for moral disarmament as a condition of the material reduction of arms', it would request the union's Executive Committee to ask public authorities to refrain from allowing children to attend military displays, because 'the mind of a child, lacking an adult's mature knowledge of the horror of war, is likely to be carried away by its meretricious glamour'.⁹⁸ Responding to claims that the LNU had passed the resolution,

the Navy League criticised the decision as ‘unpatriotic and contrary to the best interests of the Empire’.⁹⁹ Gilbert Murray saw fit to issue a lengthy response to the Navy League, noting that the LNU itself had not passed such a resolution, but had instead referred the matter to its Education Committee.¹⁰⁰ Murray wrote that he, like the LNU’s Education Committee, only objected to the martial and militaristic nature of events such as the bombing of a ‘native village’ at air displays. He felt it was ‘not a piece of fun, nor a thing over which children should be encouraged to crow with delight’.¹⁰¹

Despite such criticism, the Navy League used fleet reviews, warship launches, Navy Weeks and other forms of military theatre as vehicles to promote both navy and nation and to lobby for greater naval armaments. Planning the content of a pamphlet to accompany the fleet review for George V’s silver jubilee in 1935, Lord Lloyd suggested it should give an overview of the event alongside a comparison with contemporary and pre-war figures ‘showing the deplorable reductions which had been made in our Naval Defence Forces and our grave weakness at sea’.¹⁰² Nevertheless, the league felt the review would be a ‘spectacular’ occasion and decided to make a special appeal, sending material to more than 20,000 non-members. In doing so, it hoped to ‘take advantage of the large publicity which would be given to naval matters at that time’.¹⁰³ Similarly, at the suggestion of Lord Lloyd, the league’s entire office staff visited George VI’s coronation fleet review in 1937.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, it was invited by various shipping companies to provide commentators and lecturers for the event, with the league privately expressing satisfaction that ‘it would be possible to ensure a certain amount of Navy League propaganda in their commentaries’.¹⁰⁵ If the league was less active in its promotion of the 1935 and 1937 fleet reviews than their pre-war counterparts, it still saw the propagandistic value of such events and remained keen participants in naval theatre and pageantry. It was Trafalgar Day, however, that represented the league’s primary vehicle for the public promotion of navalist propaganda.

Navalism and Nelson Day messages

In his study of Empire Day in Britain, Jim English notes that in the aftermath of the First World War ‘the survival of and (in some places) extension of Empire Day celebrations appears curious, given that its attendant militaristic rituals and jingoistic legacy appeared anachronistic after the catastrophe of the war’.¹⁰⁶ English’s reflection provides a useful comparison for an examination of Trafalgar Day.¹⁰⁷ One would certainly expect

there to have been little enthusiasm for Trafalgar Day after the First World War, particularly in light of long-standing narratives that suggest that the post-war period was characterised by bitter disillusionment and scepticism, where ideas of patriotism and glory were rejected by an emerging artistic modernism which portrayed the 'true horrors of war'.¹⁰⁸ While the extent to which the First World War marked a point of rupture has been increasingly revised and nuanced, many still point to the 'outpouring of pacifist and anti-war literature' and an apparent hostility towards 'exuberant patriotic display' as evidence of a hostility towards both patriotism and militarism after 1918.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, Trafalgar Day retained much of its pre-war significance. Writing in 1921, *The Times* suggested that as 'the years advance, and as the event, so fresh in the memory, of the greatest of all wars tend to recede into historical retrospect, Trafalgar Day assumes an ever larger and wider meaning'.¹¹⁰ Several years later, *The Daily Mirror* similarly declared that '[n]othing diminishes the attraction of Trafalgar Day as an anniversary – not even the passage of time and the intervention of a war which made those of Napoleon look insignificant'.¹¹¹ Representing similar 'militaristic rituals' as Empire Day, Trafalgar Day promoted heritage, commemoration and naval nostalgia. However, it was also a crucial platform for the Navy League to narrate the navy's place in post-war Britain and stood in stark contrast to the competing use of public ritual by liberal internationalist bodies such as the LNU.¹¹²

The form and ceremony of Trafalgar Day after 1918 closely resembled pre-war celebrations. However, Trafalgar Day also occupied a significant part of the post-war commemorative landscape. This is especially important to highlight because the navy is often overlooked, if not excluded entirely, in the commemoration of the First World War.¹¹³ In the years following the armistice, wreaths on Nelson's Column were often dedicated to the 'remembrance of officers and men of the Navy who lost their lives in the Great War'.¹¹⁴ Beyond Nelson's Column, wreaths were placed at the Cenotaph on Trafalgar Day. Yet, for some in the Royal Navy, Nelson's Column provided a more natural focal point for naval commemoration than other national sites of mourning such as the Cenotaph or the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior as they considered 'the latter two as belonging to the Army'.¹¹⁵

Alongside events at Nelson's Column, many Navy League branches made pilgrimages to local war memorials on Trafalgar Day so that 'the great heroism and self-sacrifice of our seafarers during the war shall not pass unrecorded'.¹¹⁶ The league's East Suffolk Branch, for example, placed wreaths on Ipswich's war memorial. The wreaths were dedicated to the 'undying memory of the men of the Royal Navy, Merchant Service and



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NELSON DAY, 2ND OCTOBER, 1930.
Scene at the Nelson Column, Trafalgar Square.

Fox Photos.

Figure 6.2 Nelson Day

fishing fleets, as well as many soldiers and civilians who gave their lives at sea for England and for us in the Great War'.¹¹⁷ By situating the event in the post-war commemorative landscape, the Navy League ensured that Trafalgar Day remained relevant, unifying and that the First World War at sea did not fade from public consciousness.

The desire for remembrance did not mean that Trafalgar Day was entirely formal or solemn. In the post-war period, a much broader range of events emerged. These aimed to engage the public in acts of remembrance, commemoration and naval ritual. Concerts, pageants, plays, dances, balls, film screenings, museum exhibitions, sea shanties, lectures, parades and football matches were held as fundraising initiatives, for educational purposes and simply to broaden the appeal of the annual event. Moreover, such events were increasingly accessible. In 1926, the BBC broadcast Trafalgar Day proceedings from the deck of the *Victory*. It also arranged special Trafalgar Day programmes, including musical items, lectures, plays, naval sketches and even Trafalgar Day talks for *Children's Hour*.¹¹⁸ As well as articles in local and national newspapers, military periodicals and naval journals, and coverage by the BBC, newsreels including British Pathé, British Movietone and Gaumont British all broadcast the event ensuring that much larger audiences than those who attended commemorations were reached.¹¹⁹

Although Trafalgar Day was a Navy League initiative, a number of other naval, military and ex-service organisations commemorated the event for numerous financial, educational, political and propagandistic purposes. The Navy Records Society, Society for Nautical Research and branches of the Old Comrades' Association, Royal Naval and Royal Marines' Association, Navy and Army Veterans' Association, White Ensign Club, British and Foreign Sailors' Society and Missions to Seamen all staged banquets, church services, lectures, balls, sea shanties or parades for Trafalgar Day.¹²⁰ As the number of organisations involved in such a broad range of activities indicates, Trafalgar Day remained a central part of the popular civic ritual of interwar Britain. Indeed, as one newspaper suggested, '[w]hatever else grows dim with years, the memory of Trafalgar Day is not allowed to die . . . In the long roll of gallant Englishmen Nelson remains the people's hero.'¹²¹

In a period in which British naval power was threatened by disarmament, economic instability and the rise of airpower, Trafalgar Day provided an important source of confidence and continuity.¹²² The Navy League was certainly among those in post-war society 'whose epochal consciousness was premised on continuity' and who 'refused to see history as irretrievably past'.¹²³ However, while Trafalgar Day clearly retained much of its pre-war currency, celebrations in the post-war period continued

to attract opposition. Some criticised the ‘madness’ and ‘wanton stupidity’ of continuing to celebrate Britain’s victory over France at Trafalgar, which was not in the ‘interests of peace’.¹²⁴ Others questioned the commemoration of Trafalgar Day in schools. Instead of fostering the spirit of internationalism, one letter in *The Coming Day* – the monthly paper of the Free Church League – bemoaned that ‘our elementary schools destroy it. Even during the war, when the French nation was our closest ally, Trafalgar Day has been celebrated in the schools. Navy League pamphlets are still distributed by Local Education authorities to the teachers in their employ as a basis for lessons on that day.’¹²⁵ Alongside such concerns, newspapers such as the *Daily Herald* lamented that the event was being ‘exploited to work up panic and rush Parliament into spending millions’ on ‘preparations for war’.¹²⁶

Conversely, while the Navy League could not claim to be the sole custodian of Nelson’s Column, it often objected to its use by other societies. For example, the league’s Islington Branch protested the ‘desecration of Nelson’s Column by the Communist and Socialist meetings held from this national monument, such demonstrations being an insult to the memory of the gallant Admiral in whose honour it was erected’.¹²⁷ The legacy and meaning of Trafalgar Day was clearly the source of conflict, yet opposition for the most part was sporadic and did little to affect its popularity.

While there was widespread participation in commemorative rituals surrounding the navy on Trafalgar Day, the meaning of the annual event was varied. For some, Trafalgar Day was a patriotic celebration of navy and nation. To others, the event was characterised by its militaristic, conservative and anachronistic nature. For many families, Trafalgar Day provided an opportunity to publicly mourn and commemorate the loss of loved ones who died during the First World War. To provide their own narrative, the Navy League published a ‘Nelson Day’ message each year which outlined its views on the legacy of Nelson, his relevance for contemporary society and provided a critique of the naval situation at the time. Through Nelson Day messages, the league attempted to nurture feelings of patriotism, duty and naval identity, while stressing the ongoing importance of the navy to the British public. As the league declared in one Nelson Day message:

In Nelson’s day . . . the Navy needed no advertisement, and British Sea Power wanted no advocate . . . Nowadays, the people require instruction in sea sense and sea knowledge, advertisement is necessary, and an advocate for the Silent Navy must be found . . . it is the Navy League which supplies these requirements of the age.¹²⁸

Such sentiments were echoed in the speeches of the widely publicised 'Nelson Day' dinners that were attended by a range of influential figures. Notable speakers included, among many others, Leo Amery, Churchill, Lord Runciman, the Earl of Derby, Hoare, Nuffield, Beatty, Jellicoe and Sir Roger Keyes. Members of the royal family also spoke at Nelson Day dinners, while proceedings annually opened with a message of good wishes from the reigning monarch. In his speech in 1930, Prince George warned that 'the Navy is connected with every detail of our national and personal history . . . If the Navy had not existed we should not have existed, and when it did not exist we also should cease to exist'.¹²⁹ In 1932, the Prince of Wales reflected that the Navy League was one of the first organisations he could remember, that he was an avid reader of the organisation's publications as a child and that he agreed with 'all the purposes of the Navy League'.¹³⁰ The Duke of York, later George VI, was to be the principal speaker in 1933, although was unable to attend due to illness.¹³¹ Nelson Day dinners were a high point in the league's social calendar – with figures from the Admiralty and royal family in particular legitimising the league's aims and activities.

The presence of the royal family on Trafalgar Day reflected a long-standing monarchical association with the maritime world, a wider "navalization" of monarchy' and the broader significance of the annual event in the popular civic ritual of interwar Britain.¹³² However, while advisors had previously warned members of the royal family not to align with the Air League as it was 'run on the same lines as the Navy League', there was clearly an increasing willingness among members of the monarchy to use the Navy League as a platform from which to champion the navy and its ongoing centrality to the nation, empire and the national character.¹³³ Equally, the presence of members of the royal family at Nelson Day dinners was crucial for the dissemination of league propaganda. As Lloyd reflected, such patronage was 'of greater assistance than anything else I could imagine' in the league's 'struggle against defeatism and pacifism'.¹³⁴

Nelson Day speeches and messages were not solely directed at Navy League members or subscribers of *The Navy*, but were published (and scrutinised) in local and national newspapers as well as in prominent naval journals and magazines.¹³⁵ Such messages provided the Navy League with a platform to lobby the government on naval issues and to shape the attitudes of British society on the centrality of the navy to the nation and empire. Trafalgar and Nelson provided the league with a 'usable past', one which could reinforce its contemporary propaganda on a wide range of issues.¹³⁶ A number of distinct themes were evident in Nelson Day messages and on Trafalgar Day throughout the period – namely, a hostility

towards collective security, disarmament, pacifism and internationalism alongside calls for naval supremacy.

The Navy League's willingness to embrace ideals of collective security and the preservation of peace through international agreement in the immediate post-war period did little to curtail public enthusiasm for Trafalgar Day, however the annual event was not immune from this temporary shift in policy. For example, the league used its Nelson Day message in 1921 to welcome the upcoming Washington Naval Conference as the 'first real step towards eliminating the suicidal policy of competition in building of ships of war'.¹³⁷ Such statements were transitory. By 1923, the league was again urging that the 'nation must continue to realise that by the sea it has its being' and argued that both the nation and empire must be maintained by 'a force of fighting ships ready to defend it'.¹³⁸ The following year, the league used its Nelson Day message to remind readers that 'our security, our livelihood, and the future of our race at home and throughout the world, rest, under Providence, upon the Fleets of the King'.¹³⁹ While Nelson and Trafalgar were used by the league to promote Britain's national and naval heritage, Trafalgar Day was also utilised to express the league's opposition towards pacifism, disarmament and collective security.

Echoing the league's wider policy, Nelson Day messages from the late 1920s to mid-1930s lobbied against the Geneva Naval Conference, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the London Naval Conference and the World Disarmament Conference. Nelson Day messages lamented that 'no country is being so heavily dosed with pacifist propaganda as our own', while the 1929 message was particularly hostile:

To Nelson the pacifism that is fashionable to-day would have been as inconceivable as the pathetic trust in treaties unsupported by force . . . it is the aim of the Navy League, in days when the strength of the national navy has become a subject of political bargaining, to strive to keep alive the spirit which created and held our vast Empire – the spirit that Nelson embodied.¹⁴⁰

For the Navy League, peace, stability and security rested not upon treaties or pacts, but upon force. Much like other forms of naval theatre in this period – such as the annual celebration of Navy Weeks – Trafalgar Day was used to remind both state and society of the importance of a strong navy and to criticise calls for naval disarmament.¹⁴¹ The Navy League's Nelson Day messages during the World Disarmament Conference, for instance, were similar in tone to its wider pronouncements, although propounded highly idealised Nelsonian traits in relation to disarmament and national defence. As Lloyd declared at the Nelson Day dinner in

1933: 'Now for ten or fifteen years the leaders of every party have preached pacifism. They forgot that, when Nelson said that England expected every man to do his duty, he was not suggesting that every man was to do his duty by Geneva or the League of Nations.'¹⁴² In opposing pacifism and international treaties, the league pointed to the importance of naval power in relation to the protection of trade, commerce and communication alongside the maintenance of empire, imperial unity and national defence. Such statements met with at least some approval by members of the public. One Trafalgar Day wreath in 1927, for example, reportedly read 'England expects, and the mother of a young sailor hopes, that he and his generation will follow in the footsteps of the immortal Nelson and do their duty'.¹⁴³

From the mid-1930s, Nelson Day messages principally revolved around issues of rearmament and national defence, yet were far less martial than one might expect. This resulted in part, as previous chapters detailed, from the league's focus on the SCC and Merchant Navy, but it also reflected an increasing closeness between the league and the Admiralty. If Nelson Day messages hardly represented a call to arms, they were certainly cautionary in tone. As the 1934 Nelson Day message warned, the 'future security of the Empire hangs precariously in the balance, for we are no longer supreme by sea, land or air, and our security depends on whether the peoples of the Empire are prepared and determined to maintain their strength at sea'.¹⁴⁴ The Nelson Day message the following year was more ominous, warning that 'crisis and the creeping mists of war have reawakened the sense of reality and exposed the perils of a weakened Fleet'.¹⁴⁵ At the Nelson Day dinner in 1935, Lloyd described how the league had throughout 'this long and dark decade of opportunism and naval neglect' stressed the need for a 'strong, a sufficient and a supreme Navy'. The league had the sympathy of Jellicoe, that year's principal speaker, who declared 'the voice of a powerful nation carries weight: that of a weak one does not'. Churchill went further, stating that unless the Royal Navy was rebuilt, Britain's empire would be brought 'clattering down in ruin'.¹⁴⁶

The Nelson Day message of 1936 was the last formal statement issued before the outbreak of the Second World War, although the league continued to mark Trafalgar Day with commemorations at Nelson's Column and with Nelson Day dinners. At the Nelson Day dinner in that year, Hoare assured his audience that the 'British Navy had never been more efficient' and would 'ensure the highways of the ocean'.¹⁴⁷ Such sentiments were echoed in the Nelson Day message, which spoke of the 'country going to work in earnest to make good the dangerous gaps in her defences and to build her fleets again'. Reflecting on the league's work, the message

declared that ‘the Navy League through many years, in all the alternating gusts of apathy and enthusiasm, has laboured diligently, unceasingly and successfully to see that the great lesson taught at Trafalgar is not forgotten or ignored’. ‘We are’, the message continued, ‘entering a new phase of national and Imperial endeavour . . . The Navy League has greater responsibilities and new opportunities . . . the Navy League means to shoulder these responsibilities and seize these opportunities.’¹⁴⁸

The final Trafalgar Day in peacetime occurred only several weeks after the Munich Agreement. While war had been temporarily averted, Lloyd felt that the country could ‘look back with pride and satisfaction possibly to only one thing, namely, the power and preparedness of our Fleet, whose mobilisation . . . undoubtedly constituted almost the only effective argument in the conversations that took place on the other side of the Channel’. The temporary peace that had been secured at Munich did little to alter the league’s calls for naval supremacy or criticism of naval disarmament. Speaking at the Nelson Day dinner that year, Lloyd reflected that throughout the ‘last 10 years of pacifism and disarmament, the Navy League has never ceased for one day in the year, with its speakers up and down the country, to warn this country of the dangers of Lord Baldwin’s policy of disarmament’. ‘[I]n the days of toil and sacrifice that await us in the near future’, Lloyd declared, ‘the Navy League has a great part to play’. The American Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy was more reserved in his address, fearing that recent events would ‘undoubtedly stimulate the already frenzied race for arms’. While he suggested that it would be ‘hard to quarrel with the decision of any nation to build up its military forces’, he feared that the ‘armaments burden’ was reaching a point that threatened ‘to engulf us all in a major disaster’.¹⁴⁹ Less than a year later, this disaster was realised.

Conclusion

As in 1914, Trafalgar Day in 1939 was shorn of its usual grandeur. The annual dinner and religious service were cancelled and no Nelson Day message was published. Plans for King George VI to attend Trafalgar Square to unveil memorial fountains in honour of Jellicoe and Beatty were similarly delayed. Nelson’s Column was devoid of decoration, although wreaths were laid at the column’s base on behalf of the Navy League and the high commissioners of the dominions, while a wreath was also placed on Nelson’s tomb in St Paul’s Cathedral. The league’s wreath on Nelson’s Column bore the inscription: ‘In memory of those who fought at sea in the past for Britain’s freedom, and in gratitude to the seamen of

Britain and France, fighting side by side to-day'. Alongside these decorations, Nelson's 'England Expects' was flown in Trafalgar Square. If the column lacked the usual resplendent decorations, Trafalgar Day was still reportedly observed with a 'quickened interest and depth of feeling that are natural at a time when the best-loved of British sailors lives again in the thoughts of his people'.¹⁵⁰ As part of the brief ceremony surrounding the placing of the Navy League's wreath, a small SCC detachment formed a guard of honour. While there was 'rather less Nelson touch' in a ceremonial sense than in previous years, a number of sailors, soldiers and airmen took part in the league's ceremony to pay tribute to 'Britain's greatest naval victory'.¹⁵¹

Although the key commemorative and ceremonial aspects of Trafalgar Day – the decoration of Nelson's Column, the tribute at Nelson's tomb, a religious service and an annual banquet – remained largely unchanged, the meaning and significance of the annual event shifted on a number of occasions. From the late nineteenth century until the First World War, Trafalgar Day championed Nelson and highly idealised Nelsonian qualities of duty, discipline and sacrifice. Heritage, nostalgia, continuity and tradition were all key characteristics of the event, although the day was also used to impress upon both state and society the importance of sea power for the preservation of nation and empire. For some, the more martial, anachronistic elements of Trafalgar Day were clear, although the event nevertheless remained popular. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, the form and ceremony of Trafalgar Day shifted to align with wider changes in commemorative practices. No longer was the day merely about Nelson or Trafalgar (although many attempted to evoke Nelson in calls for military service). Instead, Trafalgar Day in wartime also commemorated the ordinary sailor and provided a space for families and friends to publicly mourn and venerate their loved ones who died at sea. Such practices were replicated in the post-war period, where Trafalgar Day formed an important part of the commemorative landscape. Yet, it was not long until Trafalgar Day was, once again, far more martial, militaristic and overtly politicised in nature. From the mid-1920s, the Navy League employed the annual event to call for British naval supremacy and to lobby against collective security, pacifism, internationalism and disarmament.

From its inception, Trafalgar Day occupied an important place in British civic ritual. As John Mackenzie notes:

Trafalgar Day remains a resonant date in the calendar, commemorated in many places in the Anglophone world. The continuing significance of this day, remembered annually in so many places for almost two

hundred years, is ample evidence of the mythic status of the action it commemorates and the most famous actor at the centre of that victory. Indeed, the legendary status of Horatio Nelson is probably the greatest of all the heroic myths created by the British to explain the essence and uniqueness of their history.¹⁵²

As in the case of fleet reviews, warship launches and Navy Weeks, Trafalgar Day fostered sea-mindedness and popular navalism on a local, national and imperial scale. It was widely reported on in local and national newspapers and in a broad range of naval journals and magazines. It was celebrated in schools, by organised youth movements and was supported by senior members of the royal family alongside numerous figures from the social, political and military elite. Unlike Armistice Day – which was abandoned for the duration of the Second World War – Trafalgar Day was celebrated throughout the conflict, albeit in a somewhat muted and more solemn form.¹⁵³ For the Navy League, Trafalgar Day commemorations in wartime would demonstrate that ‘sea power still rules the events of man . . . sea power will determine this dreadful and abhorrent conflict.’¹⁵⁴

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14. Czisnik, 'Commemorating Trafalgar', 143.
15. Czisnik, 'Commemorating Trafalgar', 144.
16. Czisnik, 'Commemorating Trafalgar', 143.
17. *The Navy League Journal*, November 1896, 131.
18. *The Times*, 22 October 1896, 4.
19. *The Spectator*, 24 October 1896, 2.
20. *The Cardiff Times*, 24 October 1896, 4.
21. *The Times*, 22 October 1896, 4; *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 1902, 7.
22. Cited in *The Navy League Journal*, November 1898, 164–5; November 1899, 176.
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27. *The Navy League Journal*, November 1896, 131. See also White's response to Conan Doyle, *The Navy League Journal*, November 1897, 276. For the league's response to Shaw, see *The Navy League Journal*, November 1898, 158.
28. NMM, MSY/6/3/3/6, NL Minute Book, MEC, 24 September 1900, 3–4.
29. *The Navy League Journal*, October 1905, 246; November 1905, 273.
30. John M. MacKenzie, 'Nelson Goes Global: The Nelson Myth in Britain and Beyond', in *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*, ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 157. Cf. Andrew Lambert, 'An Entente Centenary: Commemorating Trafalgar Without Wounding "The Susceptibilities of France"', in *The Age of Anniversaries*, ed. Otte, 61–81.
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Chapter 7

Empire Air Day: aerial theatre and airmindedness

On Saturday 20 May 1939, the promise of a dazzling aerial spectacle drew over one million people across Britain to seventy-eight civil and military aerodromes. Marking the ‘coming-of-age’ of the RAF as an independent service, spectators saw over 5,000 aeroplanes – including the latest types of fighters and bombers such as Spitfires, Blenheims and Hurricanes – ‘[h]urling through the air, their engines roaring’, representing ‘the world’s finest aircraft’ and demonstrating the ‘winged might’ of Britain.¹ These performances formed part of Empire Air Day (EAD) – an annual event initiated by the Air League in 1934. Reviewing the activities of 1939, the league was satisfied with the progress that had been made, confidently proclaiming ‘we have become an air-minded nation’.² *The Aeroplane* responded with similar enthusiasm, referring to ‘one of the greatest aviation demonstrations in our history’ which had illustrated ‘how air-minded our country has become and the secure and abiding place the Royal Air Force occupied in the hearts of our people’.³

Despite widespread fears surrounding the destructive potential of the bomber, aerial displays such as EAD attracted vast audiences and elicited a range of emotional responses: fear and anxiety sat alongside enthusiasm, excitement, pride and patriotism. The roots of aerial theatre were commercial and civilian in nature. However, as the 1930s progressed, such demonstrations became increasingly militarised, foreshadowing the character of future warfare through displays of aerial conflict and the simulation of mock aerial bombardments.⁴

In examining EAD, this chapter relates the event to broader themes in the history of interwar Britain, namely nation, empire, militarism,

modernity and youth. In doing so, it argues that EAD offers an important perspective into the ways in which British society interacted with – and ascribed meaning to – technology, modernity, militarism and the visual and material culture of conflict in a period of acute international tensions. The promotion of nation and national identity through military spectacle had a long and distinguished pedigree in British civic life, while fleet reviews and warship launches were increasingly popular in the decades prior to the First World War.⁵ As [Chapter 6](#) revealed, the Navy League also made extensive and effective use of public ritual to promote popular navalism and to champion British naval power. Yet, if EAD was underpinned by tradition, it was also characterised by technological innovation. Alison Light describes this tension between tradition and modernity, specifically in relation to British culture and society in the interwar years, as ‘conservative modernity’. The construction of national identity through ‘conservative modernity’, Light argues, was Janus-natured; it looked both backwards and forwards and was simultaneously modern and reactionary.⁶ In some respects, EAD can be seen to encompass a particularly ‘conservative modernity’: it drew upon long-standing links between the military and popular civic ritual, but it was also undoubtedly modern and innovative. However, while Light argues that ‘conservative modernity’ was shaped by ‘pacific rather than aggressive urges’, the same cannot be said for EAD.⁷

Despite the supposed intellectual and public disdain for military theatre and pageantry following the First World War, aerial theatre was a politically and culturally acceptable way of promoting rearmament, popular militarism, technological innovation and the military capabilities of the British state both domestically and internationally. EAD was supported by large sections of British society, key military figures, the most senior members of the royal family, politicians of all stripes and newspapers across the political spectrum. In many respects, EAD represented a particularly popular and public manifestation of liberal militarism and of Britain’s development as a warfare state.

Aerial theatre before Empire Air Day

Aerial theatre occupied an important place in the popular civic ritual of the interwar period and was key in promoting air-mindedness among the British public. Air races such as the King’s Cup and the Schneider Trophy drew vast audiences, while huge crowds welcomed back pioneer aviators such as Sir Alan Cobham and Amy Johnson from their respective flights to Australia in 1926 and 1930. A range of local civil aerial pageants

and displays were also held across Britain throughout the interwar years, often attracting thousands of spectators.⁸

The Air League itself had a long-standing interest in spectacle, pageantry and aerial theatre. In 1910, little more than a year after its inception, the league organised popular flying exhibitions at the Crystal Palace with the aviation pioneer Claude Grahame-White.⁹ While aviation was in its infancy prior to the First World War, Air League officials reflected that it was 'only by ocular demonstration in the shape of flying meetings, popular lectures, theatrical shows, and such practical methods that public interest [in aviation] will be aroused'.¹⁰ After 1918, the league lobbied for an air day at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 and later considered staging an 'International Civil Air Week'.¹¹ It also discussed a number of schemes with Sir Alan Cobham who approached the league with a proposal for a 'National Aviation Day Tour'. Writing to the league, Cobham stated that he 'particularly wished to have the Air League associated with the undertaking' as it would give it 'an opportunity of getting in touch with the people' and aid the organisation in its 'general propaganda work'.¹² The tour ran from 1932 to 1935 and included flying demonstrations, aerobatics, parachute displays and the opportunity for members of the public to fly. The league offered little in the way of practical assistance, yet it was represented at both Cobham's tour and at the British Hospitals' Air Pageants Tour, which staged displays in towns and cities throughout Britain in the early 1930s.¹³

Prior to EAD, the largest and most influential form of aerial theatre was the Hendon Air Display that ran from 1920 to 1937. Held at Hendon aerodrome in north London, the annual display 'turned the progress of British military aviation into a yearly ritual, and drew attention to one of the main justifications of an independent air force'.¹⁴ Hendon was highly politicised, distinctly militaristic and often 'war-like'.¹⁵ Spectators witnessed formation flying, races, aerobatics, aerial combat, simulated aerial bombardments and even aeroplanes 'swoop[ing] down upon hordes of many-coloured "Wot Knotts" . . . blowing *everything* up with terrific bangs'.¹⁶ Hendon has traditionally been interpreted as a 'manifestation of popular imperialism' and the imperial aspects of Hendon were certainly apparent, and objectionable, to many contemporaries.¹⁷ For instance, the anti-war Women's International League for Peace and Freedom sent a telegram to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Secretary of State for Air Lord Swinton urging the withdrawal of displays depicting the 'Bombing of Natives'.¹⁸ However, as Holman has shown, while 'nakedly imperialistic visual rhetoric' was a feature of proceedings, only four out of sixteen set-pieces were staged in imperial contexts. Hendon was not, therefore, 'primarily a vehicle for imperial propaganda'.¹⁹ Instead, most displays

were set in industrial, and more distinctly European, settings. Like EAD, Hendon was thus a cultural projection of the warfare state and a way of underlining the RAF's ability to wage wars independently of the Army and the Royal Navy.²⁰

The militaristic nature of Hendon was evident to numerous observers, with many expressing concern over the 'abominable militarism' of the event and the 'martial impulses' the display elicited in children.²¹ Accordingly, bodies such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the National Council for the Prevention of War and the PPU publicly objected to the presence of schoolchildren at rehearsals featuring bombing displays, while LNU members and branches shared such concerns privately.²² Alongside anti-war, pacifist and liberal internationalist organisations, individuals such as J.M. Kenworthy felt that Hendon constituted a 'deliberate attempt' to 'familiarise the minds of school-children with the idea of war'.²³ An article in the LNU's journal *Headway* seemingly confirmed such fears. Detailing one child's response to the display, 'Oh, Daddy, can I join the Air Force? And please when can there be a war?', the article declared: 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings comes justification of those who praise Hendon as a recruiting agency; and of those also who damn it as the supreme glorification of war'.²⁴ Beyond creating martial impulses in children, the ILP expressed concerns that Hendon was an 'attempt to create a war-minded people' more broadly, while the London Council for the Prevention of War described the display as a 'glorification of war in its most modern and deadly form'.²⁵

Despite such opposition, others conversely suggested that audiences understood, and approved of, the militaristic and patriotic symbolism of Hendon. As *The Aeroplane* noted, 'Judging by the vast crowds gathered to see a purely warlike Display without any civil interest in it whatever . . . there is still some difficulty in believing that we are a Pacifist . . . Nation'.²⁶ Another correspondent in the same journal similarly declared that despite the 'soothing influence of Communist schoolteachers, children still love to see things blown up and burn'.²⁷ Hendon was well attended. The first display attracted 40,000 spectators, while attendance figures reached 195,000 for the final display in 1937.²⁸ However, following the success of the first EAD in 1934, the Air Ministry recommended that the day 'be accepted as an annual institution and that it should be developed with a view to ultimately replacing the Hendon Display'. The Air Ministry thought that the greatest advantage of this was that 'it enables the public from a wide area to come and see the Air Force instead of confining the occasion practically to the south-east of England' and that 'Empire Air Day also provides an opportunity of a more intimate and more informal inspection of Royal Air Force activities'.²⁹

'At home' with the RAF

EAD was based on a proposal from October 1933 by Chamier to Sir Edward Ellington, chief of the Air Staff from 1933 to 1937. Such an initiative, Chamier argued, would help to 'get the public inside aviation' and allow them to see 'how the R.A.F. lives and works'.³⁰ The idea was 'not to keep the public behind fences but to let them roam about like they do on board the battleships'.³¹ The Air Ministry agreed that the 'object of R.A.F. participation in Empire Air Day' should be 'to afford some opportunity to the public of seeing the normal life and working conditions at R.A.F. stations'.³²

Designed to be an 'at home' day, *The Times* warned audiences that they 'must not expect flying displays or any spectacular variation of the normal duties'. However, aerodromes hosted a variety of activities on EAD: dive bombing, formation flying, blind flying, aerobatics, artillery observation, defence tactics, air combats between bombers and fighters, attacks on towed targets and machine-gun attacks on ground targets.³³ While such activities were considered to come under the 'normal programme of training', they were nevertheless often visually spectacular.³⁴ Furthermore, there was confusion within many aerodromes about the form and nature of programmes staged on EAD, with one official noting that 'the temptation to introduce items of a sensational character into their flying programmes is a very strong one for some unit commanders'.³⁵ In 1937, an Air Ministry memorandum stressed that the displays were supposed to fall 'within the scope of training' whereas exhibitions of "crazy" flying are not to be given'.³⁶ However, as an earlier Air Ministry memorandum conceded, 'the term "normal training" . . . is elastic'.³⁷

While EAD aimed to provide an insight into both civil and military aspects of British aviation, it was the military side of flying that seemingly provided the greatest attraction. Interestingly, given the Air League's wider activities, Chamier privately expressed misgivings about the form that EAD had taken by 1939. He felt that 'the idea of an "At Home" [day] had rather been lost and the day was in danger of becoming a series of miniature "Hendons"'.³⁸ Chamier also articulated such sentiments publicly, writing that he regretted 'more than anything else the complete militarisation of an event designed to embrace all aviation' and desired 'less pageantry' from EAD.³⁹ Of course, as Adey remarks, while displays were 'themed on the idea of being "at home" and opening up local RAF stations to their communities, their ambitions composed a far more extensive sphere of influence . . . the airshows aimed to stimulate interest in British aviation and its capabilities as a strategic and global force'.⁴⁰

The civil aspects of EAD were undoubtedly overwhelmed in later displays. In 1934, civil aerodromes comprised over a third of the aerodromes open on EAD; by 1939, of the seventy-eight aerodromes taking part, only four were 'purely civil aerodromes'.⁴¹ Many of the events at civil aerodromes also merely reflected those at RAF aerodromes – mock battles, formation flying, bombing set pieces, aerobatics and so on – causing Chamier to lament that '[m]ost of the civil aerodromes seem to have been overawed by the magnitude and magnificence of the military air pageants and to have felt themselves unable to participate in the scheme – no doubt fearing that their own small shows would bring them into contempt'.⁴²

Like Hendon, EAD was not devoid of ideological or propagandistic content. The Air League made extensive use of public ritual and aerial theatre to legitimate its aims and objectives, to disseminate its message to the widest possible audience and to put the air force and the nation on a public stage.⁴³ The Air Ministry equally saw the propagandistic value of the displays. As EAD coincided with RAF expansion from 1934, the display provided a platform for the Air Ministry to project its increasing strength and modernity.⁴⁴ In many respects, EAD illustrates the increasingly harmonious relationship that existed between the Air League and the Air Ministry. The Air League required Air Ministry permission to use RAF aerodromes, with J.M. Spaight, then principal assistant secretary of the Air Ministry, dealing with the risks and necessary insurance behind the displays.⁴⁵ Prominent figures from the Air Ministry contributed to programmes, attended displays and, as we shall see, provided ringing endorsements of EAD. Although the Air League suffered from a lack of funding throughout the period, proceeds from EAD were donated to the RAF Benevolent Fund. After only two displays, *Air Review* claimed that the funds generated by EAD equalled two-thirds of the proceeds raised by all Hendon displays over a seventeen-year period.⁴⁶ By 1939, the figure raised by EAD was estimated to be over £35,000.⁴⁷

Alongside the substantial funds raised by EAD, the annual event served as an important recruitment tool for the RAF and many were reported to have joined the service as a direct result of the display. Two days prior to EAD in 1935, the Air Ministry announced a large-scale recruitment scheme with Londonderry appealing to 'the youth of the nation to join the Royal Air Force'.⁴⁸ Recruitment efforts accordingly featured heavily in press coverage of the display that year. *The Manchester Guardian* described 'a long queue of young men . . . asking for particulars of entry into the Air Force' and a 'rush of would-be recruits for the Royal Air Force'.⁴⁹ *The Daily Mirror* similarly suggested that young men 'wanted to see what service life really was like, to examine the machine

and apparatus and surroundings among which they would live before entering on a new career in the air'. The newspaper noted that EAD 'gave them that opportunity, and for many of them the decision was made on the aerodromes there and then'.⁵⁰

Airmindedness and the militarisation of British youth

Attendance figures on EAD testify to the popularity of the display and were indicative of the airmindedness of many within British society. This is especially so as many aerodromes were difficult to get to and three of the six displays had particularly bad weather.⁵¹ This is important to note: poor weather meant that flying programmes could be curtailed or, in some cases, completely abandoned.⁵² Attendance (as measured by ticket sales) in 1934 was around 137,000; in 1935 it was 200,000; in 1936 it was 214,500; in 1937 it was 353,000; by 1938 figures had reached 500,000 and, by 1939, over one million people across Britain attended EAD.⁵³ Even if spectators went more than once, this figure of nearly 2.5 million across six displays is remarkable.

One would perhaps expect increasing international tension in the 1930s to limit enthusiasm for EAD. In fact, the creation of the Luftwaffe, the use of chemical weapons by aeroplanes in the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the intensive aerial bombardment of Madrid, Guernica and other areas in the Spanish Civil War, and the increasing likelihood of another war following the Munich Conference in 1938 did little to deter visitors from EAD.⁵⁴ Attendance numbers thus confirm Helen McCarthy's assertion that the 'popular culture of militarism . . . remained an important presence in Britain despite the ravages of war . . . the new peace-mindedness of the inter-war decades did not attenuate the public thirst for military spectacle'.⁵⁵ Of course, figures were helped by low admission charges and cheap railway fares which were arranged in connection with the event. Tickets for EAD cost 1s for adults and 6d (reduced to 3d in 1935) for children, with schoolchildren in parties of twelve or over offered cheaper tickets and children under five years of age given free admission. Prices at Hendon, meanwhile, ranged from 2s to £7.⁵⁶

While Hendon catered to the social elite, the Air League was reluctant to do so on EAD. When the Air Ministry suggested that at EAD 'there should be various prices of admission, the holders of higher priced tickets to receive extra amenities such as seats or special enclosures', Chamier strongly protested. He pointed out that 'one of the attractions of E.A.D. was the friendly atmosphere created by the mixing of all classes of people'.⁵⁷ The Air League felt that Britain could not 'take its proper place



Figure 7.1 Some of the 13,000 Air Day visitors to Hendon aerodrome

in aviation “unless there is a proper public appreciation of air matters”. Empire Air Day is intended to interest the “man in the street.”⁵⁸

Unlike Hendon, EAD was a nationwide event. Although roughly half of the aerodromes open on EAD were located in the Home Counties, it was celebrated in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and received coverage well beyond the London-based newspapers.⁵⁹ Indeed, newspapers from across the political spectrum reported on, and largely supported, the display: *Air Review* claimed that over 400 separate newspapers had covered EAD by 1936.⁶⁰ Alongside local and national newspapers, the aviation press – particularly *Flight* and *The Aeroplane* – discussed EAD in great detail. Newsreels and illustrated newspapers also depicted the impressive visual elements of the display.⁶¹ Reports of EAD initially focused on the promotion of air-mindedness in a positive sense. Describing the first display as ‘an emphatic success’, *The Daily Mirror* deemed it ‘abundantly evident from the large contingents of visitors to these aerodromes that this country is becoming enthusiastically air-minded’. The *Daily Mail* similarly declared that ‘[a]ll Britain must be air-minded . . . The first Empire Air Day marks a new epoch in the development of British flying.’⁶² However, by later displays, coverage underlined the importance of EAD for projecting images of military strength and security as we shall see.

Spectacle was important in drawing crowds – yet, so, too, was the materiality of EAD. As *Flight* reported, ‘[o]nce cajoled to an aerodrome, young and old alike become consumed by a raging curiosity to see, touch, sniff and scramble upon aeroplanes at close quarters – especially military aeroplanes’.⁶³ This sensorial and material engagement with aeroplanes particularly appealed to British youth. As *The Times* noted, ‘hundreds of small boys must have climbed into cockpits and worked bomb release gears for the first time’.⁶⁴ The same newspaper reflected on the ‘delight of the average boy at being able to handle a machine-gun and an empty bomb’.⁶⁵ The draw of the more militaristic aspects on display was further underlined by the *Dundee Courier*, who declared that boys were ‘Happy Among the Bombs’, and by *The Aeroplane*, who remarked that ‘youth is more warlike . . . at all stations the youngsters crowded round the machine-guns and bombs and weapons of offence’, describing ‘[y]oung England’ as being attracted ‘by the most warlike display’.⁶⁶

As well as engaging with offensive weapons of war, children were encouraged to learn about, and interact with, items of civil defence – particularly the gas mask. Understandably, this met with conflicting reactions. One journalist wrote that the ‘scene of schoolboys wearing gas masks was a reminder that the next generation may be obliged to wear these grim instruments of protection if gas attacks are launched by



Figure 7.2 'Contact' (An Empire Air Day cameo)

air in another war'.⁶⁷ Conversely, *The Aeroplane* stressed that youngsters 'inspected with relish [the] gruesome drawings of gas blisters' and got 'a great thrill by being fitted with gas masks and being allowed to run about in them and get a whiff of tear gas', although it admitted that this was 'to the horror of their parents'.⁶⁸ The way that children engaged with the material and sensory world of conflict in the form of gas and gas masks illustrates the militarisation of the civil home front, and of British youth in particular, that occurred on EAD.⁶⁹

While the league primarily attempted to interest boys in aviation, it secured the support of notable female pioneer aviators on EAD. Both Amy Johnson and Jean Batten, the latter of whom completed the first direct solo flight from England to New Zealand in 1936, attended and championed EAD. Batten was present at Hornchurch aerodrome in 1938 in her record-breaking aeroplane, while Johnson saw the potential of EAD for fostering an interest in flying as a career for children, noting 'I can imagine that before the day is over this question will be asked in all parts of the country: "Daddy, can I be a flyer when I grow up?"'⁷⁰

The widespread presence of children on EAD was not without opposition. While the anti-war National Union of Women Teachers accepted the 'importance of accustoming children to modern methods of transportation', it questioned the more 'sinister aspects' of EAD, particularly the 'fostering of a warlike spirit' among children.⁷¹ When the Air League displayed EAD posters in schools, certain educational authorities also reacted with hostility. For example, members of the Wood Green Education Committee felt that 'these sort of things look like war', and that EAD was little more than 'disguised militaristic propaganda'. Like the National Union of Women Teachers, members of the committee feared that EAD would engender a martial and militaristic spirit among children, insisting that 'we have got to keep education apart from what may be purely militaristic policies'.⁷² As EAD was an important recruiting ground for the RAF, children were undoubtedly among the intended audience of the displays and their vast numbers at aerodromes suggest that militarism, in the form of aerial theatre, proved attractive for British youth.

Empire and nation

The connection between empire and air power was a key trope in much of the discourse surrounding EAD, even if exhibitions were not, for the most part, imperially themed. As Bernhard Rieger argues, the 'imperial *leitmotif*' has 'figured as an important, long-standard theme in British discussions about technology'.⁷³ EAD was no exception in this respect.

The date chosen for EAD – namely Empire Day – reflected, of course, a conscious decision.⁷⁴ As *Air Review* stressed, it drew attention to ‘the lesson that the safety and prosperity of the Empire is connected with our place in the air’.⁷⁵ Air Ministry officials described EAD as ‘an Empire festival’, while Lord Londonderry wrote to the Air League expressing his satisfaction ‘that Air Day is being celebrated upon Empire Day, for this happy association shows clearly the great importance which aviation has for the Empire’.⁷⁶ Such was the significance of Empire Day for the display that the league even raised objections to the Army’s consideration for an ‘at home’ day falling on Empire Day.⁷⁷

The Air League’s appropriation of Empire Day indicated the importance it accorded to aviation’s imperial dimensions. At the organisation’s AGM in 1934, Sutherland stressed his desire for the event to become ‘an annual institution’ which would ‘spread beyond the borders of this country to the Empire beyond the seas’.⁷⁸ Such sentiments were evident in the published propaganda associated with the event: official souvenir programmes often included articles on the importance of aviation for the preservation and defence of empire.⁷⁹ In 1934, to promote imperial air-mindedness further, EAD celebrations featured the new four-engined Imperial Airways airliner, the *Diana* (a de Havilland DH86), built especially for the Imperial Airways route from England to Australia.⁸⁰ By making it part of the programme on EAD, the league emphasised the strides being taken in civil aviation as well as the connections between Britain and its empire.

Links between empire and EAD were commonplace in the public pronouncements of many senior Air League members, the Air Ministry and politicians. However, the display also had resonance beyond Britain. Both Australia and South Africa celebrated EAD for the first time in 1935. The observance of EAD further spread to New Zealand and India, with the idea ‘taking root’ in Canada by 1937.⁸¹ EAD was even staged in Bermuda by 1939.⁸² The annual event emphasised the importance of aviation for imperial unity, communication and security. As we have seen, Hendon was markedly imperial on occasion and highlighted the importance of aerial bombing for imperial policing (even if set pieces were predominantly staged in European or industrial settings). By the first EAD in 1934, the RAF no longer lacked a strategic or ideological purpose with the threat of the bomber helping to preserve the RAF’s ‘institutional autonomy’.⁸³

Alongside its imperial role, EAD sought to instil a sense of pride among domestic audiences by displaying the aerial might of Britain. Yet, the annual event also emphasised the importance of the aeroplane for the preservation of the nation itself. While the aeroplane has been linked to notions of Britishness after 1940 – particularly in relation to the

Battle of Britain and the Blitz – there was a strong relationship between the aeroplane, aerial theatre and the nation prior to the Second World War. As Peter Fritzche observes, ‘images of aviation’ could ‘validate claims of national prowess and technical mastery’.⁸⁴ EAD certainly provided an important platform to exhibit national prestige, modernity and technological mastery.

While images of nation and national identity formed part of EAD, deterrence was also key. In many respects, EAD was an arena of deterrence, projecting images of British aerial superiority to other nations. Speaking on Britain’s defensive forces in March 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared that the ‘sight of this enormous, this almost terrifying power which Britain is building up has a sobering effect, a steadying effect, on the opinion of the world’.⁸⁵ While such sentiments were not necessarily shared by all within the Air Ministry, EAD was undoubtedly intended as a performance of power visible to both domestic and foreign audiences.⁸⁶

The striking visual elements of EAD also lent themselves to film. British Pathé, Gaumont British and British Movietone all covered EAD, often in a ‘nationalistic and militaristic’ manner.⁸⁷ Newsreel coverage invariably focused on the spectacle and pageantry of EAD, particularly formation flying, dive bombing and aerobatics, pointing to the technological sophistication of the aeroplanes displayed. Discussion of EAD in a war-like manner was commonplace in much newsreel footage: Hurricanes in formation flight were described in one newsreel as keeping ‘their formation like a line of infantry’, while another newsreel noted the number of bullets a Spitfire could fire in a minute. Newsreels also showed demonstrations of fighters ‘repel[ling] the invader’ highlighting the ‘efficiency of British pilots and British machines’.⁸⁸ By 1939, newsreels assured their audiences that ‘the wealth, skill and determination of this little island has built up a stupendous fleet to take its place among the leaders . . . These pictures tell the world: the skies are safe for Britain.’⁸⁹ This shift in tone reflected the changing nature of both EAD coverage and of the day itself.

Debates about technology and the nation on EAD employed both defensive and offensive motifs.⁹⁰ For example, one EAD report in 1939 solemnly stated: ‘Look up to the skies and see how Britain is preparing to defend herself against her enemies in the air’.⁹¹ Others underlined the more offensive potential of the RAF. EAD programmes confidently declared that ‘Britain is Building an Air Armada’, while Chamier stated that the Air Ministry was ‘using Empire Air Day to show the country – and the world – the power of Britain’s reborn Air Arm’.⁹² Another reporter observed that crowds were ‘left in little doubt’ of the RAF’s efficiency after EAD, while *The*

Aeroplane proclaimed that 'service pageantry is an opportunity to reveal to friends and enemies in other lands the type of men and equipment we can put into the field, onto the high seas or in the air when the time arrives'.⁹³ Displays seemingly provided at least some encouragement to spectators. As one observer privately reflected after visiting Tangmere aerodrome in 1939, 'there were a reassuring number of Hurricanes to show people where their money is going'.⁹⁴ While early descriptions of EAD centred on positive forms of air-mindedness, by the late 1930s the tone of coverage was far more defensive in nature and linked EAD to the military preparedness of the nation. The Air League, the Air Ministry and many prominent politicians, as well as both the aviation and popular press, all saw the strategic and military value of EAD.

Of course, at this point the aim of the state and the Air Ministry was deterrence. In 1936, Chamberlain spoke of his 'enthusiasm' for an air force that, fully developed, would possess 'terrific striking power', which would be 'the most formidable deterrent to war that could be devised'.⁹⁵ By 1938, Kingsley Wood wanted an air force strong enough 'so that whatever the strength of the German air force, Germany itself would risk destruction if they attacked us'.⁹⁶ The presence of modern aeroplanes such as Hurricanes, Spitfires, Blenheims, Hampdens, Wellingtons and Whitleys provided an indication of the RAF's increasing modernisation and power.

While the Air League and Air Ministry recognised the potential of aerial theatre for putting the air force and the nation on a public stage, the latter was conscious of just how much displays revealed. In one telling incident, an air attaché of the German embassy was questioned at an aerodrome on EAD after being found making notes on certain aeroplanes.⁹⁷ Members of the public were prohibited from carrying cameras at aerodromes and aeroplanes on the 'secret' list were not exhibited to the public. In later displays, the Air Ministry stressed that it did not want members of the public examining cockpits or being given information about the equipment of modern aeroplanes. Performance figures of aeroplanes were also prohibited from being included in EAD programmes.⁹⁸

In addition to showcasing British aerial power, EAD impressed upon the British public the more threatening aspects of aviation. Many aerodromes invited members of the public to wear gas masks and walk into a sealed gas chamber, where a 'harmless' gas would be released to simulate a gas attack. They could then walk through a mild concentration of gas without a mask, to see the effect of gas and the function and efficiency of the gas mask.⁹⁹ This blurring of civil and military spheres of society was another way of physically reminding 'post-war inhabitants of the legacy of war waged against civilians at home'.¹⁰⁰ This militarisation of EAD

increased when Sir John Anderson, tasked with the co-ordination of civil-defence preparations while lord privy seal in Chamberlain's government, contacted the Air Council in 1939 regarding the inclusion of ARP exhibits on EAD. The Air Council subsequently approached local authorities 'with a view to the provision, where practicable, of air raid precautions exhibits'.¹⁰¹ The Air Ministry undoubtedly felt that more could be done to incorporate ARP displays after only four stations included demonstrations of this kind in 1937.¹⁰² Although EAD initially promoted both civil and military aviation, the inclusion of civil-defence measures, the shift of tone in media coverage and the increasing militarisation of the display reflected the broader preparation of the warfare state for future conflict.

Reception and responses

The chapter so far has outlined the scope, scale and nature of EAD. Assessing how the annual event was received is more challenging. Of course, attendance levels are one important indication of approval: as we have seen, millions attended EAD over the six displays. Millions more would have read about the event in newspapers and the popular aviation press, while many would have seen the display in newsreels.

EAD – particularly the technological innovation and modernity on display – elicited complex and often contradictory emotional states: fascination, enthusiasm and excitement coexisted alongside fear, anxiety and even horror. As Rieger argues, British experiences of modernity were characterised by 'ambivalence about the modern that resulted from perceptions of change as both creative and destructive'.¹⁰³ This understanding of technological innovation – and of the emotional response to the aeroplane – can be traced through EAD. While crowds marvelled at the speed and sleekness of modern machines – with the Spitfire being lauded as 'an object of wonder' by one reporter – the mass flights of fighters and bombers overhead provided a reminder of the threat posed by the aeroplane.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, while one report declared that 'the giant all metal bombers' inspired confidence in audiences that 'England is prepared for emergencies and does possess some marvellous war weapons', another noted that 'spectators saw with mixed feelings the uncanny accuracy with which bombs can be dropped from attacking planes'.¹⁰⁵

Recent work has shown how pageantry – and the performance of war through pageantry – was a means through which many sections of the British public made sense of, and commemorated, the events of the First World War. In the aftermath of conflict, pageantry could 'affirm and propagandize political ideas about wars and the nations that fought them',

showcase ‘patriotism and imperialism’ and convey ‘understandings of the nature of loss and sacrifice’.¹⁰⁶ In many ways, EAD – albeit pageantry of a different kind – provided the British public with an opportunity to engage with the possibility of another war. It was a setting in which political ideas about war, nation and empire could be affirmed; where patriotism, imperialism and nationalism could be showcased. More distressingly, through displays of the latest weaponry, it was a site in which potential loss and sacrifice was rendered tangible.

EAD stood in stark contrast to the ‘splendid anachronism’ of Britain’s wider public pageantry in the 1930s.¹⁰⁷ David Cannadine suggests that pageantry in England was the antithesis of the ‘technologically sophisticated forms of ritual’ found in Italy, Russia and, in particular, Germany whose use of aeroplanes in rituals ‘implied a commitment to technology and an impatience with anachronism’.¹⁰⁸ However, as a prominent feature of civic life, EAD undoubtedly pointed to a commitment to modernity and technologically sophisticated forms of ritual.

There was clearly an appetite within British society for martial spectacle in the form of aerial theatre, despite fears of a future war. While some may not have reflected on the more militaristic aspects of EAD, and attendance alone did not necessarily constitute an endorsement of militarism, spectators did not consume aerial theatre passively and would have been at least somewhat aware of the militaristic nature of EAD. Of course, this was not the only draw for spectators. As *The Times* noted, high attendance levels might have been due to ‘the growth of the class of people who have relations in the expanded Air Force, or by the increased interest of those who have been roused by recurrent threats from overseas, or simply by the desire for a fine afternoon’s entertainment’.¹⁰⁹ As EAD coincided with RAF expansion from 1934, the growth in attendance may also be explained by the increasing scale and modernity of each display, especially as the emphasis at most aerodromes was on the military, rather than civil, aspects of aviation. Higher attendance figures in 1938 and 1939 are also likely to have resulted from the conclusion of Hendon in 1937.

In comparison to public reactions, the response of the aviation community, the popular press and public figures is much easier to trace. EAD was endorsed not only by the Air Ministry, but by other aviation leagues, societies and manufacturers as well as by bodies on the far right such as the BUF.¹¹⁰ EAD also had the backing of newspapers from across the political spectrum. The event was described as ‘the biggest and certainly the best national air festival’ and as ‘the greatest nation-wide air display in the world’.¹¹¹

Moreover, EAD was publicly endorsed by an array of influential politicians, military figures and by senior members of the royal family. During

their respective premierships, both Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin commended the Air League for its organisation of the event.¹¹² MacDonald's support is particularly interesting given his prior assertion that 'so long as militarism in any shape or form exists it is a menace to peace'.¹¹³ Militarism in the form of aerial theatre was seemingly more palatable. On his visit to Bircham Newton aerodrome on EAD in 1934, King George V was 'greatly impressed with the remarkable efficiency of those who took part in the air display'.¹¹⁴ EAD was also praised by Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII), who was 'convinced of the extreme importance of flying as a means of national and imperial communication' and stated that 'it is impossible to exaggerate the importance for the country of the development of air-mindedness, not only among enthusiasts but among the whole population'.¹¹⁵ Likewise, King George VI felt that the event would 'afford striking proof of the progress which is being made in aviation throughout the Empire'.¹¹⁶ The role of the royal family on EAD further points to the 'conservative modernity' of the displays and highlights the long-standing use of new media technologies, civic ritual and ceremony by the monarchy for projecting an image of accessibility and modernity.¹¹⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, successive secretaries of state for air championed EAD. Lord Londonderry suggested that EAD advanced 'both the security of the Empire and the cause of peace'; Lord Swinton 'did not think there could be anything better for recruiting for the R.A.F.', and Kingsley Wood, whose first flight as Swinton's successor was on EAD in 1938, asserted that it provided 'a convincing demonstration of the power and efficiency of the R.A.F.'¹¹⁸

Despite widespread support, EAD did not attract universal acclaim. A leaflet issued by the left-leaning UDC outside aerodromes in 1934 criticised the Air League for its opposition to the abolition of civil and military aircraft and for its organisation of EAD:

You can easily see but for propaganda in the press and displays like the one you have just enjoyed, there would be a fearful danger of the abolition of bombing . . . Thank you for your support. You have not only helped in a small measure the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund, you have done more . . . You have dropped another British bomb to explode disarmament and peace.¹¹⁹

While *The Aeroplane* dismissed the leaflet as the work of 'half-witted pacifists', 'anti-British Communists' and 'anti-Air Force agitators', the UDC was not alone in its opposition to EAD.¹²⁰ Indeed, forty PPU members distributed posters and 5,000 '*Burn the Babies!*' leaflets outside Castle Bromwich aerodrome in 1937.¹²¹ The leaflet declared that

There are some things no one would do – not even in the name of Patriotism. For instance, no one, however loyal, would put his neighbour's baby on fire at the suggestion of the Secretary of State for War. Babies, we feel, are neutral. But modern warfare means war from the air. War from the air means bombing babies.¹²²

At Kenley aerodrome in 1938, PPU members again distributed leaflets and paraded in front of the aerodrome.¹²³ After EAD that year, the PPU's journal, *Peace News*, warned its readers that 'BOMBERS TODAY MEAN WAR TOMORROW'.¹²⁴

Like the UDC and PPU, the Communist Party of Great Britain was a notable critic of EAD, declaring that the "glories" of both the Empire and of the R.A.F., which the Government wants you to celebrate to-day, can only be exposed for what they are – mass murder, poverty, disease and grinding exploitation'.¹²⁵ The Communist Party of Great Britain's *Daily Worker* also reported a number of protests outside aerodromes. At Bristol, members of the 'Youth Anti-War Committee went to Filton Air Display with leaflets and posters, exposing its meaning'. This group was also reported to have dropped leaflets from an aeroplane at Romford. In Sheffield and at Hucknall aerodrome, large slogans were painted on the approaches to aerodromes reading 'Displays To-day, Bombs To-morrow' and 'AIR PAGEANT TO-DAY, GAS BOMBS TOMORROW'.¹²⁶

In 1936, demonstrations against a planned bombing range at Penrhos on the Llŷn peninsula in Wales on EAD were similarly noteworthy. Organised by members of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, the national party of Wales, there were 'hisses and boos from sections of the crowds' as well as 'free fights on a small scale' before protests were reportedly drowned out by crowds singing 'God Save the King'.¹²⁷ While the protest was seemingly limited in its impact, this was not an isolated incident. Following extensive and widespread opposition towards the bombing range, three prominent members of Plaid Cymru set fire to buildings at the range in September that year, before turning themselves in to the authorities. Imprisoned for nine months, the figures became martyrs for Welsh nationalism thanks to their 'idealistic gesture committed on behalf of nationalist and pacific values'.¹²⁸

While EAD may have been intended as a way of fostering pride, patriotism and Britishness, at least in part, it also represented a site in which competing expressions of national identity could be articulated. Indeed, only two years later, members of Plaid Cymru again protested against EAD. On trees, bridges, telegraph poles and roads leading to the now operational bombing range at Penrhos, posters described the aerodrome as 'an enemy and a curse to civilisation', declaring 'England's glory; Wales's agony' and 'The bombing school: the enemy of Wales; the enemy

of Peace'.¹²⁹ Seven members of Plaid Cymru were subsequently summoned to court and ordered to pay a fine for having 'disfigured the natural beauty of the landscape'. Although those charged with the offence did not appear in court, their representative argued that it was 'difficult to see how any countryside upon which had been inflicted the unnatural spectacle of a training school for dealing out indiscriminate death could be disfigured by such small and eminently sensible posters'.¹³⁰

Alongside such opposition, prominent individuals connected to the peace movement including Dick Sheppard, founder of the PPU, expressed their disapproval of events such as EAD. Sheppard lamented the existence of military displays such as Hendon, the Aldershot Tattoo and EAD, instead calling for a 'great Peace Circus' to tour Britain that could help 'shatter the solemn conventions of militarism'.¹³¹ Even Oliver Stewart, aeronautical correspondent for the *Tatler* and a First World War flying ace, wrote that he could not enjoy EAD as the 'grim reality [of aerial bombardment] is so close . . . I cannot enjoy any kind of show in which modes and mechanisms for mangling human bodies are fed to the populace under a sugar-coating of brass bands and gold braid, pomp and pennants'.¹³²

While one might expect the LNU to publicly oppose EAD, it was careful to distance itself from a policy of distinct anti-militarism, for the most part refusing to condemn overt forms of popular militarism.¹³³ The LNU's reluctance to criticise aerial theatre, however, prompted internal concerns that not only was the union not doing enough to combat popular manifestations of militarism, but that regular LNU speakers and contributors to *Headway* were being 'entirely swept away by the joy and excitement of air-warfare'.¹³⁴ Ultimately, the fragmented and sporadic nature of opposition to EAD meant that it did little to affect its popularity. EAD, and the promotion of rearmament and popular militarism through aerial theatre, was seemingly acceptable to large sections of British society. As Holman notes, while 9.6 million people voted in favour of an international reduction of air forces in the Peace Ballot, such sentiments did not prevent huge numbers from attending air displays in the 1930s. Many spectators were 'seemingly comfortable with the destructive power of the bomber that was soon to be unleashed on their behalf and, in some cases, actually upon them'.¹³⁵

The other principal objection to EAD focused on the risks surrounding the display. From an organiser's perspective, Chamier felt that 'the risks are very much less than those present at any ordinary flying pageant or by the Air Display at Hendon'.¹³⁶ However, EAD in 1937 involved the loss of seventeen lives. Four died in a mid-air collision while rehearsing, while thirteen people, including several civilians, died on the day itself. The deaths resulted from mid-air collisions, crashes during aerobatics as well as one aeroplane crashing into, and setting fire to, a house off the

Isle of Man. One woman, who was already recovering in bed from surgery, was rescued from the house but later died of her injuries in hospital. Her husband and son fortunately survived, although had to receive medical treatment for burns.¹³⁷ *The Morning Post* described proceedings that year, with some justification, as one of the 'blackest week-ends in the history of British aviation'.¹³⁸ The *Hull Daily Mail* also depicted the accidents in vivid terms, describing the 'horribly charred' bodies, 'women and children scream[ing]' with 'two or three' fainting from seeing the accidents.¹³⁹ Another newspaper described the 'horror of the crowd' when a man's parachute failed to open during a display. It reported that women 'screamed as the body hit the ground with a sickening thud and bounced upwards'. Fortunately, in this case, the figure was a 'sand-stuffed dummy'.¹⁴⁰ Such incidents further highlight the ways in which EAD saw clashes of civil and military spheres of society. A death toll of seventeen was hardly insignificant – especially when contrasted with Hendon, which had only seen one death in seventeen years.

Conclusion

In an article for *The Daily Mirror* in June 1933, Lord Mottistone reflected on a series of apparent paradoxes:

The Briton is the most soberly dressed man in the whole world, yet he loves nothing more than a Pageant. He glories in being undemonstrative, and yet revels in national demonstrations like the Tattoo, the Hendon Display, and the countless historical pageants that are taking place up and down the country. He passionately denies being militaristic, and yet flocks in thousands to any display of the national uniform. What does it all mean? Is it dangerous militarism or just a harmless form of national pride?

For Mottistone, the 'peace-loving Briton' flocked in such numbers to naval, military and aerial displays because the division between the 'Jingoes and the Pacifists' had 'well-nigh disappeared'. While in the 'old days the Jingoes would have cheered the spectacle, and the Pacifists would have protested with equal vigour. Now we are all of one mind . . . Nowadays all sections of the British people love to see the precision, the skill, the manliness of those whose task it is to defend us.'¹⁴¹ While Mottistone may have overstated the erosion of any distinction between jingoist and pacifist, as evidenced by the opposition towards EAD, it is certainly the case that militarism in the form of theatre, spectacle and pageantry appealed to broad sections of British society.

EAD was employed to promote rearmament, popular militarism, technological innovation and the military capabilities of the state to the British public in the late 1930s. Linking themes of nation and empire, the Air League created an aerial theatre that, despite its militaristic nature, was supported by large sections of British society, key military figures, members of the royal family, newspapers across the political spectrum and influential politicians. While the Second World War halted aerial pageantry, it did not herald an end to such displays. Although the Air League was unable to secure Empire Day as the principal day for aerial demonstrations following the Second World War, it supported the organisation of Battle of Britain 'at home' days and continued to organise its own aerial pageants.¹⁴²

EAD afforded spectators a visual, material and sensorial engagement with weapons of war outside of conflict. Despite opposition, and the risk involved in the annual event, popular and cultural forms of militarism centred around military spectacle attracted genuine and widespread enthusiasm, especially among British youth. Aerial theatre enabled the British public to interact with the aeroplane in new, dramatic and often distinctly militaristic ways. Through EAD, the Air League ensured that 'millions of eyes were turned skywards'.¹⁴³

Notes

1. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 1939, 5; *The Western Morning News*, 22 May 1939, 4.
2. *Air Review*, July 1939, 8.
3. *The Aeroplane*, 25 May 1939, 646.
4. Brett Holman, 'Spectre and Spectacle: Mock Air Raids as Aerial Theatre in Interwar Britain', in *Aviation in the Literature and Culture of Interwar Britain Aviation*, ed. Michael McCluskey and Luke Seaber (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 233; 235–8.
5. Scott H. Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars Through the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
6. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 10–11.
7. Light, *Forever England*, 11.
8. Holman, 'Spectre and Spectacle', 234.
9. *The Aero*, 7 June 1910, 457.
10. *The Times*, 7 July 1913, 6.
11. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 13 October 1931, 3.
12. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 8 December 1931, 3.
13. For example, the league was unable to provide Cobham's tour with exhibitions of model aeroplanes as requested, although it did offer Cobham its 'moral support'. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 6 April 1933, 2; 14 June 1933, 2.
14. David E. Omissi, 'The Hendon Air Pageant, 1920–1937', in *Popular Imperialism and the Military*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 206.
15. *Flight*, 1 July 1932, 598.
16. Brett Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon: The Royal Air Force Display, Aerial Theatre and the Technological Sublime, 1920–37', *Historical Research*, 93 (2020): 136; *Flight*, 1 July 1932, 598. Emphasis in original.
17. Omissi, 'Hendon', 199.
18. BLPES, Papers of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, WILPF/1/12, Executive Committee Minute Book, 1936, MEC, 14 July 1936, 1.
19. Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon', 132; 142.
20. Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon', 132.
21. *Headway*, September 1929, 180; Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), 269.
22. BLPES, WILPF/2/3, Women's International League, Yearly Report, 1933, 10; Women's International League, Yearly Report, 1934, 6; National Peace Council (NPC) 1/3, Council Minutes, 1924–1930, Council Meeting, 29 March 1928, 2; Minutes of the Annual Council Meeting, 5 July 1928, 2; Minutes of the Annual Council Meeting, 20 June 1929, 2; Peace Pledge Union Archive (PPU Archive), London, Peace Pledge Union Minute Book, MEC, 1 June 1937, 2; *Peace News*, 15 June 1937, 5; Bodleian Libraries, MS. Gilbert Murray 201, f. 94, Letter from K.D. Courtney to Gilbert Murray, 23 June 1927, 1–3; BLPES, LNU/5/26, LNU Education Committee Minute Book, Meeting of the Education Committee, 24 June 1935, 10.

23. J.M. Kenworthy, *Will Civilisation Crash?* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1927), 187. Despite this, Kenworthy was part of a sub-committee created to consider proposals for an international air week after he joined the league. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 16 June 1931, 1; 8 December 1931, 3.
24. *Headway*, August 1929, 146.
25. BLPES, ILP Papers, ILP/10/10/41, Report of Committee on Hendon Campaign, 1935, 2; *Headway*, September 1929, 180.
26. Cited in Omissi, 'Hendon', 210.
27. Cited in Omissi, 'Hendon', 213.
28. Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon', 136.
29. TNA, AIR 2/4421, Proposals for an Air Day by the Air League of the British Empire, Empire Air Day, 1934, Report, 29 October 1934, 2.
30. TNA, AIR 2/4421, Letter from Chamier to Air Chief Marshal Sir Edward L. Ellington, 25 October 1933, 1; AIR 2/4421, Empire Air Day Leaflet.
31. TNA, AIR 2/4421, Chamier to Ellington, 1.
32. TNA, AIR 2/4421, Empire Air Day, 1935. Memorandum, Object of R.A.F. Participation, April 1935, 1.
33. *The Times*, 11 April 1934, 11. For a fairly typical programme of events, see TNA, AIR 2/4445, Royal Air Force Official Programme, Empire Air Day, 1937.
34. Hansard, HC, 5th series, vol. 300, c. 966 (9 April 1935).
35. TNA, AIR 2/4422, Empire Air Day – Flying Regulations, 6 August 1937, 1.
36. TNA, AIR 2/4442, Empire Air Day Arrangements 1937, Memorandum No. 1, 12 March 1937, 4.
37. TNA, AIR 2/4449, Agenda for Conference on Empire Air Day Arrangements, 19 June 1935, 1.
38. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 13 April 1939, 1–2.
39. *Popular Flying*, June 1939, 101.
40. Peter Adey, *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 61.
41. *The Illustrated London News*, 26 May 1934, 810–11; *The Times*, 1 April 1939, 12.
42. See, for example, *Reading Mercury*, 27 May 1939, 8; *The Leighton Buzzard Observer*, 23 May 1939, 5; *Coventry Herald*, 29 April 1939, 1. *Flying*, 27 May 1939, 7.
43. Much like naval theatre prior to the First World War: see Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*.
44. On RAF Expansion Schemes A–M, see N.H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy Volume 1: Rearmament Policy* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976), 559–89.
45. TNA, AIR 2/4421, Letter from J.M. Spaight to Captain A.G. Lamplugh, 2 May 1934, 1.
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47. AL, AL Minute Book, MEC, 8 June 1939, 1.
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49. *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1935, 19.
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51. *The Aeroplane*, 29 May 1935, 616; 27 May 1936, 654; *Air Review*, July 1938, 7.
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63. *Flight*, 2 June 1938, 539.
64. *The Times*, 30 May 1938, 8.
65. *The Times*, 25 May 1936, 9.
66. *Dundee Courier*, 27 May 1935, 6; *The Aeroplane*, 29 May 1935, 616; 621.
67. *The Western Morning News*, 27 May 1935, 5.
68. *The Aeroplane*, 1 June 1938, 684; 29 May 1935, 633.
69. On the materiality of the gas mask and civil defence more broadly, see Susan R. Grayzel, *The Age of the Gas Mask: How British Civilians Faced the Terrors of Total War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) and [Chapter 1](#), in particular, of Gabriel Moshenska, *Material Cultures of Childhood in Second World War Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
70. *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1938, 7; 24 May 1934, 4.
71. *The Woman Teacher*, 6 May 1938, 255.
72. *Air Review*, June 1934, 36–7.
73. Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 233.
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76. RA, PS/PSO/GVI/PS/RAF/391, Empire Air Day, Letter from P.J. Oldfield to Major Hardinge, 15 April 1936, 1; *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 1934, 13.
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78. AL, AL Minute Book, AGM, 10 July 1934, 2.
79. See, for example, TNA, AIR 29/569, Royal Air Force Official Programme: Empire Air Day 1938, 28–31.
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86. Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark*, 607.
87. Robert M. Morley, ‘The Screen’s Threatening Skies: Aerial Warfare and British Cinema, 1927–1939’ (unpub. PhD thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2014), 113.
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89. ‘RAF Demonstration at Northolt Aerodrome’ (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, 29 May 1939).
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91. *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1939, 12.
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94. East Sussex and Brighton and Hove Record Office at The Keep, Parish of East Chilmington, Correspondence Concerning Registers, PAR 293/2/3/1, Letter from John Widdows, Thomas Eggar and Son to Lancelot [Mason, rector of Plumpton], 22 May 1939.
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100. Susan R. Grayzel, ‘Defence Against the Indefensible: The Gas Mask, the State and British Culture during and after the First World War’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014): 434.
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106. Angela Bartie et al., "And Those Who Live, How Shall I Tell Their Fame?" Historical Pageants, Collective Remembrance and the First World War, 1919–39', *Historical Research*, 90 (2017): 640.
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133. McCarthy, *The British People*, 141–2; *Headway*, August 1932, 142.
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Conclusion

Modern scholarship has increasingly challenged and nuanced long-standing narratives which maintain that the First World War stood as a 'watershed in contemporary history, starkly dividing the modern era from virtually all that had come before'.¹ Yet, while many have pointed to the ongoing presence, and indeed celebration, of 'conventional ideas of patriotism and glory' in Britain after 1918, assertions that there was a simple 'rejection of militarism', that 'anti-militarist attitudes prevailed' or that the British were a 'uniquely peaceable people' are remarkably resilient.² Despite a supposed distaste for British militarism, it nevertheless existed and flourished in diverse, vibrant and popular forms – not least through the work of associational bodies such as the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire.

This is not to deny the presence or power of anti-war voices, or to suggest that pacifism was anything other than a 'major force' in Britain.³ However, the cultural legacy of the First World War was far more contested and complex than an outright rejection of war or the straightforward dissolution of militarism and militaristic values. Moreover, militarism was, in many respects, an elusive, amorphous phenomenon which could be 'placed at the disposal of conflicting forces and ideologies'.⁴ Militarism, like internationalism, could be 'shaped by impulses that sometimes overlapped or converged, and at other times pushed in opposing directions'.⁵ Notably, liberal internationalist bodies such as the LNU were not pacifist or opposed to rearmament, but were willing to countenance force – and the bomber in particular – to maintain the rule of international law.⁶

Of course, neither the Navy League nor the Air League was immune from post-war currents including disarmament, pacifism and collective security. The Navy League temporarily embraced naval arms limitation and collective security in the early 1920s, leading to internal dissent, then revolt. Some observers even felt that the league's policy was 'not merely a rejection of its old tenets, but a repudiation of the whole conception of sea

power'.⁷ Yet, while the policy enacted by the Navy League between 1919 and 1922 does indeed demonstrate the challenges faced by a militaristic pressure group in the wake of a 'momentous event like the First World War', it is more difficult to sustain the idea that this heralded the 'collapse of British navalism'.⁸ Similarly, the Air League was aware of its own militaristic and martial appearance, and so briefly concentrated on civil and commercial aviation in the late 1920s and early 1930s, while also being reluctant to comment on issues relating to disarmament due to an apparent lack of technical expertise. Although it was transitory, such a policy was injurious to the league, and so it was not long until it was again lobbying for British aerial supremacy.

Perhaps one of the clearest, and most popular, manifestations of militarism and 'patriotic excess' in the interwar period was the broad range of annual military displays such as Hendon, Empire Air Day, the Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo, the Royal Tournament, Navy Weeks and Trafalgar Day.⁹ Patriotic, martial and militaristic displays were employed by the state and a range of associational bodies and non-state actors to project images of power and military might. Such events occupied a prominent place in the social and cultural landscape of interwar Britain, attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators – and in some cases over a million visitors – annually. While some condemned military displays as attempts to 'glorify militarism and school the public mind to war', as 'an essential part of the propaganda of war' and as a way of imbuing the British public with 'a drop of war fever and patriotic insanity', others expressed concern surrounding the impact that such displays would have on Britain's global status.¹⁰ As one letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 1933 lamented, 'Are we to imagine that foreign nations will abandon nationalism when they find England, a nation that is pressing them to disarm, enjoying and enthusing over the panoply and glory of militarism in the shape of Tattoos, Aerial Pageants, Navy Weeks, and mock battles'.¹¹ Despite such opposition, this did little to diminish public appetite for popular manifestations of militarism. As we have seen, the Navy and Air Leagues were key actors in the promotion of the military through visual spectacle, theatre and public ritual. The Navy League used Trafalgar Day to commemorate and celebrate the history and heritage of Britain's long-standing naval supremacy. Empire Air Day, meanwhile, was an important site of modernity, technological innovation, deterrence and military prestige. Despite limited opposition, naval and aerial theatre represented acceptable ways of promoting popular militarism, rearmament and the military capabilities of the British state to both domestic and foreign audiences. Moreover, events such as Trafalgar Day and Empire Air Day advanced 'notions of Britain as a historic, martial community'.¹²

The two leagues also did much to cultivate martial and militaristic values among sections of the nation's youth. Both leagues disseminated their messages in schools through lectures and essay competitions, by distributing literature and through organising trips for children to military displays. They were also present at public exhibitions aimed at schoolchildren. Although citizenship and character-building formed an important part of the SCC and the ADCC, service, discipline and duty were also central to the work of the two youth organisations. The SCC provided a reserve of manpower 'disciplined and imbued with love of country', while the Air League admitted that the ADCC would 'afford a very fruitful recruiting ground for the Royal Air Force'.¹³ Both the SCC and ADCC were involved in civil defence at the outbreak of the Second World War and hundreds of thousands of boys were recorded as playing an active role in the services in wartime. While it has been claimed that the 'youth of Britain had rejected war' after 1918, children enthusiastically engaged in militaristic and martial activities under the auspices of the Navy and Air Leagues.¹⁴ For instance, as part of mock combats staged during annual SCC camps, children took part in raids '[a]rmed with rifles, bayonets and (blank) ammunition' on an 'enemy position, in which field and machine guns were brought into use, followed up by an attack by riflemen and a final bayonet charge'. Cadets often took these activities seriously. One report noted that 'it was a good thing the rifles were not loaded'. Cadets no doubt enjoyed being 'mown down when they came into the arena of imaginary machine gun nests' and 'sho[oting] themselves to pieces', and such activities clearly point to an ongoing desire among youth to engage with the 'pleasure culture of war', but the warlike nature of such training did little to alleviate fears surrounding the militarisation of British youth.¹⁵

Both leagues used more conventional methods to extol the virtues of sea and air power to state and civil society, including staging public meetings and lectures, issuing pamphlets and printed propaganda, publishing articles and letters in local and national newspapers, and disseminating propaganda through their official organs. Alongside their wider propagandistic endeavours, both leagues were involved in a considerable range of charitable and philanthropic schemes and each made important contributions to relief efforts during and after war. Neither league was solely concerned with national defence, however the promotion of naval and aerial supremacy remained at the heart of each organisation's programme of public education and political lobbying.

The Navy and Air Leagues were male-dominated, although women were active in both organisations. Women took part in charitable, philanthropic, educational and social endeavours, but they were also engaged

in propagandistic activities. Patriotism and militarism were popular rallying cries for many women. The Women's Aerial League, for example, was resolved from 'patriotic motives that England should build more airships than any other possible combination of countries' and called for 'supremacy in the air complementary to, but no less absolute than, that supremacy on the seas which had been England's boast since navies were'.¹⁶ Such work points to the presence of both 'gender traditionalism and gender modernity' which was a feature of broader associational bodies in this period, but it also complicates imagined binary divisions between pacifism and femininity on the one hand and militarism and masculinity on the other.¹⁷

To advance their agenda in political spheres, both leagues were active in lobbying politicians, while senior members of each league were vocal proponents of sea and air power in parliament. Both leagues supplied information to MPs to use in parliamentary debates and each directly pressured parliamentary candidates during general elections. Air League members were present in political pressure groups including the Parliamentary Air Committee, while both organisations formed part of secret deputations sent to Andrew Bonar Law and Stanley Baldwin during their respective premierships to express concern on subjects including the independence of the RAF and the condition of the nation's shipping industry. To ensure the Royal Navy, Merchant Navy and RAF remained within parliamentary consciousness, key figures from the two leagues initiated – or made important contributions – to debates within the House of Commons and House of Lords at significant junctures. Lord Lloyd was particularly active in his support of the Merchant Navy during the late 1930s, while Air League figures were vocal in their anxiety regarding the condition of the RAF during and after the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva. Although the leagues may not have had any decisive impact on the formation of military policy or grand strategy, leading politicians were certainly conscious of the propagandistic influence of each organisation.

In seeking to promote British naval power after 1918, permanence and notions of 'historic continuance' were important for the Navy League.¹⁸ The league frequently employed motifs of nostalgia, heritage and tradition, with Nelson and Trafalgar providing a particularly 'usable' naval past.¹⁹ Such themes also featured prominently in its broader propagandistic work. For example, the league 'ever sought to bring home to the nation the lesson of history, that it is by the sea that we have our being, and that to-day, as ever, our security and the future of our race both at home and throughout the world rest, under Providence, upon the British Navy'.²⁰ Despite the increasing technological, strategic and cultural importance of the aeroplane, the Navy League expressed its satisfaction that the

‘inherited sea-sense of the nation has refused to allow itself to be swayed by those who would seek a substitute for the Fleets of the King’.²¹ The league was not anti-modern or anachronistic, however its use and frequent evocation of the nation’s naval past led to derision from some. Philip Noel-Baker, for example, suggested that the Navy League was ‘still living, like Lord Lloyd, in the days of Nelson; they still believe that nations can grow great and can be safe by the methods which their heroes of the eighteenth century applied’.²² The Air League, meanwhile, placed emphasis on technological innovation and modernity, particularly in relation to concerns surrounding future conflict. In 1934, for instance, an article in *Air Review* asked ‘Will the advance of science in the machine age bring peace?’ The league was far from optimistic:

If the present world systems continue there will be more world wars, wars that will be on vaster scales than anything yet dreamed of. Disarmament will avail nothing, because as science advances, an industrial nation can turn quickly to converting machines into the instruments of destruction . . . Peace in the next few generations of the machine age, at least, will be had only by those equipped to maintain it.²³

British responses to modernity – particularly in the form of naval and aerial theatre – were characterised by ambivalence, with excitement and enthusiasm merging with fear, anxiety and a growing recognition throughout the 1930s that the advance of science and technology was, in fact, unlikely to herald peace in the ‘machine age’.

For the Navy League, the Royal Navy remained central to the preservation of Britain’s islandhood and security – despite suggestions that the aeroplane heralded an end to British insularity – and to the maintenance of trade and commerce. It also remained an important emblem of pride, patriotism and Britishness, with the league deeming ‘sea sense’ and ‘sea spirit’ as central components of the British national character. Contrastingly, the Air League pointed to the feats of pioneering aviators and the modernity and technological prowess of British machines in air races, demonstrations and expeditions to foster pride and national identity. For the Air League, it was the aeroplane which was crucial to preserving the nation, empire and imperial communications. To forge imperial unity and foster links between Britain and the self-governing dominions, the two leagues formed a network of overseas branches (albeit on a smaller scale in the Air League’s case). Such branches were important in disseminating the work of the two leagues on an imperial level, while also providing important spaces for Britons to engage with homeland identity and culture while overseas. However, if there was an

emergence of a 'kinder, gentler version of imperialism' after the First World War, this did not prevent either league from underlining the ways in which the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force could be used as tools of imperial policing and as a means of reinforcing control over sections of Britain's empire – particularly through gunboat diplomacy and aerial bombardment.²⁴

In carrying out their work on a local, national and imperial scale, each organisation mobilised broad public and political support throughout much of the interwar period and boasted an array of influential political and military figures among its supporters. Individuals such as Winston Churchill, Leo Amery, Lord Curzon, Stanley Baldwin and even Ramsay MacDonald supported the two leagues in a range of activities. So, too, did the most senior members of the royal family, who attended Trafalgar Day and Empire Air Day proceedings and spoke in favour of the SCC and ADCC. Although neither organisation ever abandoned its non-party status, Liberal and Labour engagement was minimal throughout the period. This is not to suggest that the two leagues were mere auxiliaries of the Conservative Party, but each had extensive links. Each organisation also had strong financial and personal connections to the far right and armament manufacturers, with the latter attracting particular controversy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, associations with the 'merchants of death' did little to dispel accusations of militarism.

Alongside support from the political and social elite, the Navy and Air Leagues largely had the backing of the Admiralty and Air Ministry, respectively. Earls Jellicoe and Beatty, Sir Roger Keyes, Sir Samuel Hoare, Lord Londonderry, Lord Swinton, Sir Kingsley Wood and Sir Hugh Trenchard all spoke in support of the leagues and promoted their work. The Admiralty and Air Ministry undoubtedly saw the propagandistic value of each organisation and assisted their educational activities, youth organisations and promotion of naval and aerial theatre. Neither league acted as a conduit for the dissemination of official views, but as many members had served in the Admiralty or Air Ministry – and due to numerous shared aims and objectives – neither league was a persistent critic of the service departments. Clearly, assessing the legacy of each league through membership numbers alone would be to ignore the significance of both organisations in the social, cultural and political landscape of the interwar period.

The influence of the Navy and Air Leagues can, in part, also be measured by the level of opposition they faced. The LNU and key liberal internationalist figures – chiefly Philip Noel-Baker, Robert Cecil, Gilbert Murray, David Davies and Norman Angell – were particularly hostile to both leagues. Figures on the political left such as Fenner Brockway,

Clement Attlee and Harold Laski were similarly critical, while anti-war, pacifist and other left-leaning organisations – including the ILP, UDC, PPU and the Communist Party of Great Britain – all objected to the policies and activities of each league. Newspapers such as the *Daily Herald* and the Communist Party of Great Britain's *Daily Worker* were also condemnatory on a number of occasions. The Navy and Air Leagues were accused of being militarists, scaremongers, alarmists, jingoists, appendages to the 'merchants of death' and even warmongers by their detractors. In the context of the peace-mindedness of the interwar years, such opposition is unsurprising. However, the fact that such a broad and eclectic array of anti-war, pacifist and liberal internationalist actors and organisations deemed it necessary to persistently counter Navy and Air League propaganda highlights that, despite a supposed hostility towards, and indeed rejection of, British militarism, popular, cultural and institutional forms of militarism resonated with large sections of society. If one accepts that the 'forces of organized patriotism and imperialism were part of a continuity within British political culture' from the Edwardian into the post-war period, then the same is undoubtedly true of organised militarism.²⁵

By 1939, the Air League was satisfied that Britain 'need now fear no military competitor in the air', with the Duke of Sutherland suggesting that this resulted, at least in part, from the 'campaign which has been unremittingly carried on by the Air League since those dark days when the air forces of this country were cut down almost to vanishing point'.²⁶ Speaking at the league's AGM in July that year, Sutherland reflected that the league 'has done a great deal to awaken the public and the government to a full recognition of the fact that the greatest threat to our security comes from the air'. He regarded the increased support for aerial power in the 1930s as 'the greatest success that the Air League has, or could have, achieved' which resulted from 'steady and unspectacular propaganda'. Sutherland further noted that Britain's military preparedness was particularly remarkable 'in a democratic nation wedded to the cause of peace'.²⁷ While Sutherland's verdict may have overstated the Air League's influence, through aerial theatre and pageantry in particular, its propaganda was often spectacular, characterised by modernity and the technological sublime.²⁸

Only a month earlier at the Navy League's GCM, Lord Lloyd was similarly self-congratulatory. Addressing those in attendance, Lloyd stated that 'the name of the Navy League carries a particular weight in the country to-day. I doubt if there is any other patriotic organisation to-day that has such a solid and respected name in its own sphere.' Despite this, Lloyd stressed that the league's work was not complete and that it must

continue to remind the government and the British public that 'on naval defence, fundamentally, primarily and finally depends the security of these islands . . . the work of the Navy League is required as much to-day as it ever has been before'.²⁹ While Lloyd's address was slightly less sanguine than Sutherland's respective speech, he was nevertheless satisfied with the Navy League's work. He felt that the league had played a crucial part in awakening the British public to the significance of seapower, concluding that it had contributed 'something solid to this awakening, and the further security of the country, and the people, and the Empire'.³⁰ In many respects, the Navy League helped to ensure that the 'importance of the sea remained an article of faith' in Britain after the First World War.³¹

As in 1914, Britain in 1939 was one the most modern and most heavily militarised states in Europe.³² As David Edgerton notes, Britain could claim to 'be the most powerful of the great powers'. Its armament industry was 'at least as large as any other in the world', its navy, while sacrificing its pre-eminence to non-European powers, was 'still the strongest' and in 'air armament it was as strong as any other country'.³³ Although the two leagues may not have directly influenced the rate or shape of rearmament, both leagues were among the principal exponents of the warfare state and did much to keep issues of naval and aerial power within public and parliamentary consciousness throughout the interwar period.

Organised Militarism has provided the most comprehensive institutional account of the Navy League and the Air League of the British Empire to date. In doing so, it has revealed that each league occupied an important place in the political and associational culture of post-war Britain, despite the competing work of anti-war, pacifist and liberal internationalist bodies. More broadly, tracing the conduct and contours of the two leagues provides a valuable lens through which to explore and advance our understanding of key issues of the period including naval heritage and commemoration; modernity and technological innovation; nation and empire; youth and education; disarmament, collective security and national defence; and British attitudes to war, conflict and peace. Militarism not only endured the First World War, but enjoyed significant resonance in the post-war period. While there may not have been a 'lust for war' – which for scholars such as A.J. Coates marks the 'hallmark of militarism' – among most Britons after 1918, neither was British society entirely, or uniquely, peaceable.³⁴ As international tensions increased in late 1939, organised militarism once again faced the 'crucible' of global conflict.

Notes

1. Angela Bartie et al., “‘And Those Who Live, How Shall I Tell Their Fame?’ Historical Pageants, Collective Remembrance and the First World War, 1919–39’, *Historical Research*, 90 (2017): 639.
2. Alan Malpass, *British Character and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War, 1939–48* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 35.
3. Matthew C. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism and the Crucible of War: Popular Imperialism in Britain, 1914–1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 225.
4. Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 211.
5. Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism*, 211.
6. Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 3; 137; David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 56; Waqar H. Zaidi, *Technological Internationalism and World Order: Aviation, Atomic Energy, and the Search for International Peace, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), Chapters 2 and 3.
7. Duncan Redford, ‘Collective Security and Internal Dissent: The Navy League’s Attempts to Develop a New Policy towards British Naval Power Between 1919 and the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty’, *History*, 96 (2011): 57.
8. Redford, ‘Collective Security’, 67.
9. Hendley, *Organized Patriotism*, 225.
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Epilogue: organised militarism and the Second World War

The Navy League

The outbreak of the Second World War dramatically affected the activities of the two leagues. The Navy League's leadership, Executive Committee and senior staff were substantially 'depleted by the exigencies of the war', with many leaving to serve in the Royal Navy.¹ Of course, the conflict also affected those who remained; there were multiple cases of absenteeism among junior staff members due to 'Bomb fright' and instances of office staff resigning entirely as 'their nerves had been disturbed too much for them to continue their work'.² The location of the league's office in Trafalgar Square for much of the conflict likely did little to alleviate such fears. As the league itself admitted, 'there is always the risk of sudden destruction'.³ Many of the league's domestic branches were similarly impacted, while some closed down completely. Perhaps most significantly, the league suffered the 'irreparable' loss of its highly influential and long-serving president Lord Lloyd, who died in February 1941. Although Lloyd was appointed secretary of state for the colonies in May 1940, he remained at the helm of the organisation and continued to attend meetings and direct its policy throughout the early years of war. Indeed, Lloyd assured the league's Executive Committee that the 'Navy League was his first and greatest love, and that he sincerely hoped that he would always be able to find time to give attention to its affairs'.⁴ Following Lloyd's death, Lord Beatty was eventually chosen to serve as the league's president.⁵

Despite the war's impact, the league remained active throughout the conflict. It carried out propagandistic work, albeit on a reduced scale, providing public lectures and staging meetings across the country.

It continued its educational endeavours, delivering lectures and holding essay competitions in schools. The league also continued to publish a wide range of printed propaganda and, by 1945, *The Navy* had a monthly circulation of 40,000.⁶ Trafalgar Day remained a key date in the nation's civic calendar, although the league considered it inappropriate to hold banquets or organise mass gatherings of the Sea Cadet Corps.⁷ Despite the subdued pageantry, the annual event was commemorated across the country, with proceedings frequently covered by the BBC.⁸ Wreaths were placed at the base of Nelson's Column and on Nelson's tomb in St Paul's Cathedral, although decorations took a 'greatly modified and unostentatious form', while speeches were made by Navy League and Admiralty officials.⁹ Proceedings were attended by members of the public, government officials, representatives of the services and by veterans of the First World War. As in the First World War, wreaths were dedicated not just to Nelson and Trafalgar, but to those serving at sea. Many wreaths served as poignant emblems of both loss and pride, with one bearing the words: 'To the memory of a brave man, and also to my son, whose birthday is to-day and who is also serving in the Merchant Navy'. For the Navy League, commemorations in wartime were more than a 'tribute to the greatest of British Admirals. We pay tribute to the seamen of the British and Allied Navies and Merchant Navies who once more constitute an insuperable barrier between a dictator and his dreams of world dominion.'¹⁰

Beyond such endeavours, the league co-organised public displays including the 'Victory at Sea' exhibition. Staged with the co-operation of the Admiralty and *News Chronicle*, the exhibition enabled the public to 'relive some of the most thrilling moments of this nation's struggle to keep its life-lanes safe'. The exhibition included models of ships and weaponry, alongside representations of the principal naval actions of the war including the sinking of the *Graf Spee*, the D-Day landings and the destruction of the *Tirpitz*.¹¹ Initially held at Dorland Hall in London in late 1944, the exhibition later toured throughout the country. By 1945, over 300,000 people had reportedly attended the exhibition, with all funds devoted to the SCC. While the league felt that such activities ensured that it was 'better known, and has a higher prestige and greater public support than ever before in its history', it also attempted to provide 'direct assistance to the war effort' through two primary endeavours: charity and the SCC.¹²

Following the declaration of war, it was clear that 'there would be an enormous demand for comforts of all descriptions for the men of the sea services'. The league, with its 'Empire-wide organisation', felt 'well adapted to supply that need' and so formed the Navy League Royal Navy Comforts Supply in November 1939.¹³ Initially assisting only those serving

in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Naval Reserves and auxiliary services, its scope was soon extended to support the Merchant Navy, men of the allied navies alongside the dependents of those serving at sea. Renamed the Navy League Seafarers' Comfort Supply (NLSCS) in 1941, the league also sent parcels of food and comforts to naval prisoners of war.¹⁴ Chaired by Admiral Sir Sydney Freemantle until his resignation in early 1943, the NLSCS's work was carried out by the league, the Ladies' Committee (which included Clementine Churchill), the league's domestic and overseas branches and tens of thousands of voluntary helpers in thousands of depots across the country.¹⁵ The NLSCS had the support of the Admiralty, was publicised by newspapers and the BBC and worked closely with philanthropic organisations such as the British Sailors' Society in the allocation of funds and relief.¹⁶

By 1943, the NLSCS had distributed more than 3 million gifts (alongside 800,000 cigarettes and 584 pounds of tobacco to naval hospitals that year alone).¹⁷ The following year, the league's then chairman, Admiral Sir Lionel Halsey, reflected that the 'garments, games, radio sets, boxing gloves, dartboards and footballs which have kept warm or dry or amused the officers and ratings of His Majesty's ships and their comrades in the Allied navies, have run into astronomical figures'.¹⁸ By 1945, the league estimated that it had provided 'millions of woollen garments' and 'hundreds of thousands of games of all kinds to the men of the Royal and Allied Navies', with members of the royal family among those who contributed.¹⁹ Almost £17,000 was additionally given to the British Red Cross Society for parcels to be sent to naval prisoners of war, while financial assistance was also provided to support the work of naval hospitals and the provision of hostels for seamen. This work proved extremely valuable: as one man serving on HMS *Unbroken* told the league, 'I don't think you can have any idea of how much we here appreciate these kind things . . . thank you from the bottom of our hearts.'²⁰

Alongside charity and philanthropy, the SCC represented the league's principal wartime focus. As noted in [Chapter 5](#), the corps faced considerable difficulty at the onset of war. The corps lost many instructors and facilities, while blackouts and evacuations further limited certain units. Despite this, the SCC remained crucial to the league. As the league's annual report stated in 1941, there was 'no more important service than the provision of trained recruits for the Royal Navy and the Mercantile Marine, for upon our success in "The Battle of the Oceans" the fate of the world ultimately depends'. While the league noted that there were continuous difficulties in securing officers and instructors, it felt that the corps represented the 'finest type of recruits for the sea services' and had already 'won for themselves a fine reputation'.²¹ Many younger cadets

gave 'splendid voluntary service' in coastal naval establishments and in civil defence, manning signal stations, acting as messengers to the fire service, filling sandbags, barricading windows, acting as ARP messengers, digging trenches, guarding bridges and store depots, and 'doing all kinds of useful work in support of the Civil Defence Services'.²² Many cadets faced significant danger: SCC members were awarded gallantry medals for rescuing people from destroyed buildings during air raids, while others received medals for their heroism at sea.²³ Others made the 'supreme sacrifice', with the league noting that 'many casualties were suffered among Officers, Cadets and Local Headquarters' during the Blitz.²⁴

Throughout the conflict, boys of the SCC continued such work. They also attended summer camps, with 15,000 cadets experiencing their 'first taste of life under service conditions' in 1943, while others received training on ships such as *Foudroyant* and *Implacable*.²⁵ The league additionally provided several thousand cadets with specialised signal training on *TS Bounty* to alleviate shortages in signalmen and telegraphists resulting from the use of convoy systems at sea.²⁶ The corps remained present at popular naval displays, particularly the league's commemoration of Trafalgar Day. *The Navy* continued to include information on domestic and dominion SCC units, but from 1943, the league also produced a magazine specifically relating to the corps – *The Sea Cadet*. This contained articles on the war at sea as well as information on units and correspondence from members of the corps. By 1945, 30,000 copies of *The Sea Cadet* were published each month.²⁷ The Admiralty continued to provide capitation grants for the corps throughout the conflict, which were supplemented by funds raised from the Lord Lloyd Memorial Appeal. The appeal attempted to raise £250,000 to provide central training establishments and to assist local SCC units. Although it did not reach the desired total, it still raised an impressive £135,000.²⁸

The work of the SCC was deemed to be of national importance. Writing to the Navy League regarding the corps in November 1939, Winston Churchill, then first lord of the Admiralty, stated that: 'We (The Admiralty) are deeply sensible of the work undertaken by the Navy League. It is our hope that this work can continue.'²⁹ A.V. Alexander, Churchill's successor as first lord, later spoke in more effusive terms, declaring that it was 'a stroke of genius for the Navy League to concentrate so much of its work on popularising in the minds of our youth the comradeship of life at sea, getting them to understand what seamanship really means'. Alexander further underlined that while there had always been boys and young men 'bred with the salt of the sea in their blood', it would have been 'much more difficult to have carried on in these troublesome days in the war at sea if it had not been for that steady stream of fine youth which has come from the

Sea Cadet Corps'.³⁰ In recognition of SCC's value, the Admiralty took control of the corps' training and discipline in early 1942. King George VI became the admiral of the organisation – and a patron of the Navy League the following year – although the league remained responsible for the corps' administration, social and recreational training, and for the provision of local headquarters.³¹ Following the Admiralty's increased support, membership of the SCC rapidly expanded. Little more than a year later, the corps boasted a membership of close to 50,000 across almost 400 units.³² In reflecting on the work of the SCC throughout the conflict, the league was satisfied that it had won an 'outstanding reputation for high character as well as professional ability'.³³ Alexander similarly praised the corps for its 'magnificent contribution to the war effort'. Turning his attention to the post-war importance of the SCC, he declared that in spite of 'all the scientific developments, including the atomic bomb, sea power remains the one fundamental factor on which the security of the British Commonwealth rests'. Accordingly, he considered it 'well that the seamindedness of our boys is as strong today as it ever was in the past'.³⁴

The Air League

As with the Navy League, the advent of war heralded substantial shifts in the organisation and activities of the Air League. At an Executive Committee meeting in October 1939, it was agreed that the league would 'carry on doing what it could to keep its Members in touch with the air situation and to influence air policy as and when required', although it admitted that it was 'necessary to reduce the League's activities to a minimum and to exercise as many economies as possible'.³⁵ The league retained its offices in central London, yet accepted that some of the 'rooms, staff and equipment' might be placed at the disposal of national or charitable institutions. It continued to solicit membership subscriptions and donations, but understood that many would not be able to contribute throughout the conflict. The league maintained a library service, offering books and lantern slides, and continued to hold lectures (albeit on a reduced scale). As in the case of the Navy League, numerous senior Air League figures left to join the fighting services. While the Navy League continued to publish *The Navy*, *Air Review* was suspended for the duration of the war. Instead, the league primarily communicated through circular letters, pamphlets and newspaper articles.³⁶

If much of the Air League's propagandistic work was curtailed after September 1939, the Air Defence Cadet Corps remained a primary focus. As the final 1939 issue of *Air Review* proclaimed, 'however necessary the

soldier and the sailor may be, victory will go to the side which has command of the air . . . it can be brought nearer by intensifying our air effort – by having large reserves of machines and trained men. This is why the Air Defence Cadet Corps . . . is more important than it ever was.³⁷ Notably, while *Air Review* was suspended for the duration of the conflict, the league continued to publish *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, with Captain W.E. Johns, editor of *Popular Flying* and author of the highly successful Biggles novels, regularly contributing to the journal.³⁸

Like the SCC, the ADCC carried out extensive work in relation to civil defence and was present in large numbers at aerodromes after the declaration of war. This was not without issue. As the Air Ministry thought that one of primary objects of German attack would be RAF aerodromes, it felt unable to defend the death of ADCC members to parliament or to the public.³⁹ While the Air Ministry did not object to ADCC activities upon the outbreak of war, it did not feel justified in allowing such employment to continue when there was ‘any serious danger of exposing boys to undue risk from aerial bombardment’.⁴⁰ Members of the corps were certainly exposed to danger: there were multiple cases of cadets rescuing people from burning buildings, smothering incendiary bombs and controlling fires. Like their counterparts in the SCC, boys received gallantry medals for such actions.⁴¹ By October 1939, with concern growing over the possibility that the corps’ headquarters in London could be destroyed, the number of ADCC areas was reduced to four – demarcated as Scotland, Northern, South Western and South Eastern – with each being headed by an area organiser.⁴² As in the case of the SCC, many members of the corps’ leadership were called to service. Despite such challenges, the ADCC survived both the onset and conduct of total war.

The ADCC remained active in civil defence during the early years of war. Despite Air Ministry concerns, the corps was still present at aerodromes throughout the country. Training largely resembled that provided prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Boys received lectures and training in drill, physical discipline, model making, wireless telegraphy, morse code and the theory of flight. Many units also received rifle training and took part in summer camps, parades and sporting activities such as boxing, cycling and football.⁴³ Like the SCC, the ADCC also commemorated those who died while serving in the conflict, taking part in wreath-laying ceremonies at the RAF Memorial in London on Armistice Day.⁴⁴ Finally, the corps initiated a fund to build a Spitfire named ‘The Air Cadet’.⁴⁵

The ‘determination of the [Air Defence] Cadet Corps’ to ‘play their part in the war’ received widespread praise.⁴⁶ Harold Balfour, then under-secretary of state for air, told boys they would join the ‘valiant company of the knights of the air’ and ‘write another story of courage across the

English skies'.⁴⁷ Lord Beaverbrook, the press baron who held various positions in Churchill's wartime government, enthused that 'the members of your cadet corps are the future defenders of our country's heritage'. He continued: 'they give the most splendid demonstration of the spirit of the youth of this country today. A spirit of willing and eager self-sacrifice deep rooted in the love of their country.'⁴⁸ Churchill himself, then prime minister, had 'no doubt' that the training given in the corps would enable members 'to give service worthy of the high traditions and standards of the Royal Air Force'.⁴⁹

By late 1940, faced with a shortage of pilots and observers, the Air Ministry established plans for the creation of an official, nationwide, pre-entry organisation to give training to young men who wished to join the RAF.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the Air Ministry took control of the ADCC in February 1941, renaming it the Air Training Corps.⁵¹ King George VI served as air commodore-in-chief, while Chamier was appointed commandant. The ADCC's committee 'welcomed and accept[ed] the proposals made by the Air Ministry' and felt that the implications of the corps' expansion were clear: 'Britain was determined to press on with the master plan' of 'pursuing victory through an overwhelming air power'.⁵² By the time the Air Ministry took control of the corps, it had over 20,000 members. However, this number would have been far higher if funds permitted further expansion. Tens of thousands who wished to join the corps were on waiting lists in 1940 until such funds became available.⁵³ Many letters of appreciation were received by the ADCC committee for its work, including from Churchill, Beaverbrook, Balfour and Archibald Sinclair, secretary of state for air from 1940.⁵⁴ In its formation of the ATC, the Air Ministry was certainly conscious of the debt owed to the ADCC. As *Air Training Corps Gazette* put it, 'it is obvious that the foundation of this whole great movement is the Air Defence Cadet Corps'.⁵⁵ The organisation and activities of the ATC largely mirrored those of the ADCC, while existing units were absorbed into the ATC. Chamier remained as commandant of the ATC, while the league continued to publish instructional information for the corps.⁵⁶ Leonard Taylor, editor of *Air Review* and *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, served as editor of *Air Training Corps Gazette* which the Air League published on behalf of the ATC. Despite this, while the Navy League remained heavily involved in the SCC's administration after the Admiralty took responsibility for the corps' training and discipline, the Air League no longer bore responsibility for the administration of the ATC after 1941.

While the military efficiency of the ADCC may have varied – owing to the somewhat ad hoc nature of training – many cadets were already trained in drill, discipline and in a vast array of aviation matters and

so they naturally played a key role in the RAF. By the end of the Second World War, approximately 500,000 young men had passed through the ATC and, of course, many joined the fighting services.⁵⁷ The Air Ministry recorded that 98,500 cadets joined the RAF, 9,200 entered the Fleet Air Arm, 17,662 joined the other branches of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Service, and 27,519 went into the Army. In total, it estimated that over 150,000 cadets joined the services, although the Air League put the total closer to 400,000.⁵⁸ The corps, then, was clearly an important component in the military apparatus of the British state during the Second World War.

Writing in 1944, Churchill declared that the work of the Navy League 'will never be done. When peace comes it will be their task to keep ever present in people's minds the hard lessons which this war has taught us, and to remind them of the unbreakable links that bind our Navy into the life of Britain and the British Empire.' Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, first sea lord from 1943 to 1946, meanwhile reflected that the 'Navy and the country are indebted to the Navy League for its invaluable work in constantly reminding the public of the importance of maintaining an adequate Navy in peace time and in preparing the youth of the country for service in the Navy'. Like Churchill, however, Cunningham warned that since 'we are in no position to guarantee continual peace, and, as far as we can foresee, the security of the Empire must continue to depend on adequate control of the seas, the work of the Navy League will be just as important after the war as in the past'.⁵⁹

Continuity and resilience represented similarly key themes in discussions surrounding the Air League's place in post-war Britain. The league reflected that 'full public support is essential if we are to be second to none in aviation'. Moreover, the league argued that it was only by 'keep[ing] the skies over Britain safe for future generations' that appropriate tribute could be paid to the 'memory of the young men who have given their lives in defence of the Empire'.⁶⁰ In his final address as president, the Duke of Sutherland spoke in even more cautionary tones. Addressing his audience at the league's AGM in July 1945, he asserted that the Air League was determined 'never to see the R.A.F. cut down below the safety level as it was after the last war'. Sutherland stated that the league wanted an 'Air Force big enough and strong enough to forbid aggression. We do not want air disarmament of the 1922 kind as our reward for joining the United Nations to guarantee the peace of the world.' He concluded by declaring that no government 'should stand in the way of our destiny in the air'.⁶¹

While both leagues looked to the post-war world with a mixture of optimism and defiance, the shadow of the atomic bomb loomed large. As *The Navy* put it shortly after VJ Day in 1945

No such frightful weapon of destruction had ever been imagined . . . But now that the atomic bomb is an accomplished fact and the means of releasing atomic energy for the pacific advantage of mankind have still to be discovered and perfected, we must live dangerously in a world growing more and more exposed every day, every month and every year to the peril of extinction.⁶²

Speaking at a local Air League meeting little more than a year after the cessation of hostilities, Group Captain G.L. Cheshire, a British observer at the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in August 1945, offered a similar appraisal. Echoing Stanley Baldwin's 'the bomber will always get through' speech of 1932, Cheshire warned his audience that 'atomic bombs would be used in a future war and there would be no real defence against them. No one will stop one bomb getting through.'⁶³ Although the Navy and Air Leagues survived the 'crucible' of global war for a second time since their respective formations, and while the peril of atomic extinction after 1945 was not realised, organised militarism was once again forced to navigate and adapt to the challenges of an uncertain and contested peace.

Notes

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3. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1940, 7.
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6. See, for example, NMM, MSY/6/6/1/4, Pamphlets, c.1940–1949; MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1945, 3.
7. NMM, MSY/6/3/3/28, NL Minute Book, MEC, 15 August 1940, 4.
8. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1945, 6; MSY/6/3/3/29, NL Minute Book, MEC, 16 November 1942, 1.
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10. *The Times*, 22 October 1941, 5; *The Navy*, November 1942, 305.
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20. TLA, LCC/PC/CHA/04/060, NLSCS, Progress Report, 1944, 9.
21. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1940, 3–4.
22. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1939, 5; *The Navy*, October 1939, 338–40.
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27. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1945, 3.
28. NMM, MSY/6/6/1/3, 'Lord Lloyd Memorial Appeal', Pamphlet, [n.d.]; MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1945, 6.
29. NMM, MSY/6/2/7, NLAR 1939, 5.

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31. NMM, MSY/6/3/6/1, SCC Minute Book, MEC, 15 January 1942, 1–3; RA, PPTO/PP/GVI/MAIN/6272, Navy League, Letter from Ulick Alexander to Admiral Sir Lionel Halsey, 10 December 1943, 1.
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44. *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, November 1940, 32.
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51. *Air Defence Cadet Corps Gazette*, January 1941, 9.
52. AL, ADCC Minute Book, MEC, 2 January 1941, 1–2; Leonard Taylor, ed., *The Story of the Air Training Corps* (London: Air League of the British Empire, 1946), 26.
53. *The Times*, 2 July 1940, 2.
54. AL, ADCC Minute Book, MEC, 19 October 1942, 3.
55. *Air Training Corps Gazette*, March 1941, 13.
56. See, for example, BL, Air League of the British Empire, *A Drill Book for the Air Training Corps* (London: Air League of the British Empire, 1943).
57. Taylor, *The Story of the Air Training Corps*, 32.
58. The Air Ministry figures did not account for those whose cadet service had not been noted or recorded (including those who served in the ADCC before it became the ATC). Taylor, *The Story of the Air Training Corps*, 23.

- 59. NMM, PBB9853, The Navy League, *Navy League Jubilee Year Book*, 4–5.
- 60. *The Northern Daily Mail*, 16 May 1944, 2.
- 61. *The Aberdeen Press*, 19 July 1945, 3.
- 62. *The Navy*, September 1945, 259.
- 63. *The Yorkshire Post*, 16 October 1946, 6.

Appendix I

Navy League Executive Committee, c.1918–39

This list includes only the most senior figures in the Navy League's Executive Committee. It is not a complete record of the Executive Committee, nor does it contain vice presidents who held mostly ceremonial positions and are difficult to trace accurately for the entire period.

President

1918–22: Algernon St Maur, 15th Duke of Somerset

1922–4: George Granville Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, 5th Duke of Sutherland

1924–30: Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow

1930–40: George Ambrose Lloyd, 1st Baron Lloyd

Deputy President

1926–32: Lord Sydenham of Combe

1932–6: Lord Carson of Duncairn

1936–9: Commodore the Rt Hon. Earl Howe

Chairman

1917–22: V. Biscoe Tritton (held in tandem with Col. Winfrid Ashley until 1919)

1922–34: Sir Cyril Cobb
1934–6: Viscount Lymington
1937–9: The Rt Hon. The Earl Beatty

General Secretary

1911–18: Patrick J.H. Hannon
1918–19: Rear-Admiral Robert E.R. Benson
1919–22: Rear-Admiral Ronald A. Hopwood
1922–4: Lt-Commander J.N. Benbow
1924–5: Guy Eden, Esq. (acting general secretary)
1925–32: Commander H.M. Denny
1932–5: Vice-Admiral G.O. Stephenson
1935–9: H.T. Bishop

Honorary Treasurer

1912–22: V. Biscoe Tritton
1922–3: Hon. Lt-Commander H.W. Wheeler
1923–31: Lt Col. C. Forbes Buchan
1931–6: [No honorary treasurer was appointed during this period]
1936–7: J.H.C. Burton
1937–9: A.E. Griffin

Appendix II

Air League Executive Committee, c.1918–39

As in [Appendix I](#), this list includes only the most senior figures of the Air League's Executive Committee. It is similarly not a complete record of every member of the Executive Committee, nor does it contain vice presidents who had little bearing on Air League policy for the most part and are difficult to trace accurately for the entire period.

President

- 1917–20:** John Douglas-Scott-Montagu, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu
- 1920–22:** Major General J.E.B. Seely (later Lord Mottistone)
- 1922–45:** George Granville Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, 5th Duke of Sutherland

Secretary

- 1918–27:** Douglas G.H. Gordon

Secretary General

- 1927–9:** Brig. General P.R.C. Groves
- 1929–31:** Lt Col. N.G. Thwaites (acting secretary general)
- 1933–9:** Air Commodore J.A. Chamier

Chairman

1918–29: Philip S. Foster

1929–31: Dr Gerald Merton

1931–2: Captain Frederick E. Guest

1932–9: Lord Mottistone

Vice/Deputy-Chairman

1917–27: C. Shirreff Hilton (deputy)

1923–5: Admiral Mark Kerr (vice)

1924–31: Lt Col. Ivan B. Davson (vice/deputy)

1931–2: Dr Gerald Merton (deputy)

1933–7: Griffith Brewer (deputy)

1937–9: William O. Manning (deputy)

Honorary Treasurer

1917–27: Sir Edmund Bartley-Denniss

1927–9: Sir Henry White-Smith

1929–31: Brig. General Sir Charles Delme-Radcliffe

1932–8: Sir Basil Clarke (replaced by William O. Manning in 1938)

Deputy Honorary Treasurer

1935–8: William O. Manning

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