This chapter will consider the final developments in the Franco-British command arrangements following the politicians’ gropings towards unity of command at the end of 1917 and beginning of 1918 just described. Those developments had been essentially political and British-inspired – Clemenceau saw little value in the SWC. However, the final stage in the command relationship was not a political but a military solution, prompted by a military crisis – the German forces on the Western Front, increased in number by divisions returned from the east, using extravagant and ultimately futile tactics, smashed Haig’s complacency and his Fifth Army during the days following 21 March 1918. It is necessary to be selective here, for the final victorious campaigns still await a thorough study. Here I leave the fighting on one side, looking only at the mechanics of the unified arrangements for command and the attitude of the participants to unity of command. Only by taking into account attitudes can the mechanism’s efficiency – the output measured against the input and the losses through friction – be understood.

Before the first German spring offensive began on 21 March 1918 and provoked the final crisis of the war, the French and British commanders-in-chief had defeated by private agreement the attempt to impose political control over military actions in the person of the president of the Supreme War Council’s Executive War Board, General Ferdinand Foch. In order to avoid having to supply divisions to the proposed general reserve, which was the only means whereby Foch could exercise any power, Haig and Pétain kept their reserves under their own hand, preferring instead precise agreements for mutual support in the area which General
Map 8.1 The Western Front showing German attacks, spring 1918.
Gough’s Fifth Army had completed taking over from French Third Army by 30 January.¹

Conferences were held in Nesle on 21 February and in Compiègne the next day between French headquarters and the staffs of the units involved, namely French Third Army (which existed only as an army HQ staff) and General Hamilton Gordon’s IX Corps. Three ‘hypotheses’ were discussed, and concentration zones were agreed for each, with all the transport and supply needs worked out in great detail, right down to the level of water pipes and veterinary services. Command of relieving divisions, together with artillery, was settled, whether those units were simply to relieve or actually to intervene.² Haig and Pétain approved the arrangements on 7 March.

They probably thought that the mutual assistance scheme allowed them to place their remaining reserves according to individual purposes. Both men have been criticised for placing their reserves, respectively, too close to the Channel ports or too far to the east. Pétain was responsible for the rest of the front to the Swiss border, and he wished to attack in Alsace-Lorraine. Nevertheless, there were twenty-five divisions behind the Champagne front, with a flanking group of six infantry divisions, plus some cavalry that was being used for quelling unrest in towns, between Fifth Army, Paris and Champagne.³ Furthermore, all rocades were built so that troops could be moved quickly by rail. Sufficient motor transport to move 100,000 men (or 12,000 tons of supplies) was also ready.⁴

Haig, on the other hand, had concentrated his reserves in the north.⁵ Lloyd George claimed in his War Memoirs that Haig did this out of ‘pique’ at being forced to extend his line.⁶ Certainly Fifth Army front was long

² Procès-verbal de la conférence tenue au G.Q.G., le 22 février 1918’, 5 March 1918, AFGG 6/1, annex 432. For the agreement reached at Nesle, see ‘Note pour la réunion des généraux commandants de groupes d’armée au G.Q.G. le 3 mars 1918’, 28 February 1918, ibid., annex 410.
⁴ AFGG 11, 616.
⁵ For Fifth (and Third Army) fronts and dispositions, see Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, I: 114–16; and for the French see Guy Pedroncini, Pétain Général en Chef (1917–1918) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 270–5.
(forty-two miles with Third Army next door holding only twenty-eight miles); it was weakly held (twelve infantry and three cavalry divisions (a cavalry division only has the rifle strength of an infantry brigade) as against Third Army’s fourteen divisions); it had poor defences (it was the area across which the Germans had withdrawn in 1917, laying it waste as they retired); and it was faced by 750,000 Germans. The only arguments for holding that line so weakly were, first, that normally the ground round the Oise river was very marshy, thus providing a defence – but the spring of 1918 had been particularly dry after the wet autumn. Secondly, Gough had the space to retire behind his front, and such space was not available further north. Yet this argument is very convenient.7 Surely at the back of Haig’s mind (or subconsciously) lay the thought that he had a perfect excuse to say ‘I told you so’, if Fifth Army was forced back. Indeed, Haig wrote to his wife that the retreat was the result of having had to extend his line.8 In any case, he could then call on the French to take back all the front that he (Haig) had been compelled to take over. Rawlinson took the same attitude. Even after the tide had turned, he told Churchill that the disasters of March had been ‘entirely due to our taking over too much line and that the French people were at the bottom of this’.9 Whatever the reason, the result was that British reserves were largely in the north, with the immediate reserves to come to Fifth Army’s aid dependent upon the working of the Franco-British mutual assistance plan.

Another important factor when considering the British dispositions before 21 March is the question of leave. Haig had written at the end of December 1917 of the ‘urgent necessity’ of giving leave to the sorely tried BEF. Complaints about the French failure to grant leave entitlements to their own men had been one of the major causes of the collective disobedience following the Nivelle offensive earlier in 1917. There was some slight resentment against the greater ease and greater numbers of French leave patterns. Wilson told the War Cabinet on 15 January that currently there were 350,000 French on leave as against 80,000 British. The BEF had carried out long campaigns in 1916 and 1917, and some men had not had leave for eighteen months.10 It was clear that something would have to be done to give some respite to the BEF.

8 Haig to Lady Haig, 26 March 1918, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 150, NLS.
9 Rawlinson diary, 11 September 1918, RWLN 1/11, CCC.
One could not criticise, therefore, the fact that at the beginning of 1918 a daily average of 5,500 officers and men were returning home on leave. It is legitimate, however, to criticise the numbers still absent on 21 March when the Germans attacked and when it was known that the enemy had stopped all leave. Why were there 80,000 men on leave – the rifle power of approximately six divisions, and the number the War Cabinet was informed on 23 March could be rounded up to send back to France – when the facts of the forthcoming attack, its timing and place were already known? This led to the commanding officer of 104 Battalion, for example, who had gone on leave on 19 March, having to wander round northern France trying to find his unit.

The mutual assistance plan, the disposition of French and British reserves, and the large numbers of the BEF on leave in the UK all reveal that both Haig and Pétain believed that the expected German attack could be contained. After all, between 1915 and 1917 the enemy had contained all previous British and French attacks on the Western Front. The obvious place for the Germans to attack was at the point of junction. Intelligence reports suggested the Fifth and Third Army fronts between Arras and Saint-Quentin as the area of attack, and once the victor of Riga had been identified opposite Fifth Army, it became a racing certainty.

British and French also cooperated in their defensive preparations. Both commands had seen the importance of a bridgehead at Péronne on the Somme. The GHQ memorandum on the ‘Principles of Defence on Fifth Army Front’ emphasised Péronne’s importance for communications. Behind Péronne, still on the Somme, lay the important rail junction of Longueau, just to the east of Amiens. The Somme river crossings were vital for the movement and supply of the BEF whose main supply bases were south of the river but whose main deployment was north of it.

Accordingly Haig wrote to Pétain on 4 February requesting a further 20,000 Italian labourers to be allocated to the work over and above the 3,000 already ceded. Since the French perceived the importance of the work as well, a request was made for the Armaments Ministry to release the 20,000 workers that Haig requested. Loucheur visited Haig

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12 Minutes, War Cabinet 371, 4 p.m., 23 March 1918, CAB 23/5.
13 Travers, Killing Ground, appendix I.
14 The successive intelligence reports are given in Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, I: 104–8.
15 Ibid., appendix 12 (4 February 1918).
16 Haig to Pétain, 4 February 1918, AFGG 6/1, annex 328; Anthoine to Armaments, 8 February 1918, ibid., annex 343.
personally on 16 February and promised to allocate immediately 10,000 Italian workmen, with some North Africans to follow.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, despite GHQ’s professions of worry, the head of the MMF found the British ‘despairingly slow’ to act and unwilling to take advantage of the French Third Army’s previous studies of the Péronne area.\textsuperscript{18} Most of the men allocated to Fifth Army were building roads, railways, hospitals and other rear facilities, rather than digging defensive trenches in the week before the German attack.\textsuperscript{19} After the war, Gough claimed that his defences were in a poor state – ‘nor did sufficient labour arrive in time to enable us thoroughly to complete ... the Péronne bridgehead’.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus the defensive work was in hand, albeit inadequately, and the detailed schemes for mutual assistance were in place in good time. However, the lightning speed of the German advances threw all planning into disarray and meant that a large general reserve such as Foch had tried to assemble would be the only way of stopping the Germans without losing too much ground. What if the general reserve had been in place?

Certainly Bliss believed that, if Foch had been allied commander with an allied reserve placed to intervene on either the French or the British front, ‘March 21st and subsequent days would have been “another story”’.\textsuperscript{21} Haig could have spared troops from the north, because the fewer the units there the better if they were cut off from the French. The crush of troops cut off from their main supply lines would have been horrendous. Colonel Payot, the French equivalent of the Quartermaster General, was very anxious about the inadequacy of Calais and Boulogne to supply the British troops in the north if Amiens fell. He said that he would ‘guarantee to feed the British Army from our southern bases and the other French ports’, and asked for this scheme to be put to Haig.\textsuperscript{22} Pétain said he had the whole of France to retire in, but the BEF had nowhere to go. With hindsight, both Haig and Pétain could have spared men for a centrally commanded reserve.

Thus, exactly a week before the German offensive, the position was this: over Foch’s furious protests at the 14 March SWC meeting, when Clemenceau shouted at him to be quiet, the two CinCs were permitted to

\textsuperscript{17} Haig diary, 16 February 1918, WO 256/27.
\textsuperscript{18} Laguiche report #3343/EM, 15 February 1918, 17N 348, [d] 4, AG.
\textsuperscript{20} General Sir Hubert Gough, \textit{The Fifth Army} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 231.
\textsuperscript{21} Tasker H. Bliss, ‘The Evolution of the Unified Command’, \textit{Foreign Affairs} 1: 2 (1922), 22. Bliss reproduces a map of Foch’s proposed distribution of the reserves at p. 19.
\textsuperscript{22} Diary, 29 March 1918, Brigadier-General C. R. Woodroffe papers, 667/226/1, IWM. He had seen Payot on the 27th.
maintain a defective plan of mutual support. Lloyd George feared to impose a general reserve on Haig so soon after his victory over Robertson; and Clemenceau seemed prepared to wait for the German guns to impose what Haig would not accept willingly. Haig was confident. His only fear was that the enemy would not attack. He met Humbert, GOC Third Army, a ‘smart well turned-out little man’, and talked over the plans on 20 March, the eve of the attack.

The Germans, however, were ready. They had forty-four more divisions on the Western Front on 21 March than there had been in November 1917. Furthermore the Germans appreciated fully the Franco-British tensions that would hinder the efficient unfolding of the Haig/Pétain accord for mutual support. ‘It need not be anticipated’, wrote the Eighteenth Army’s COS to Ludendorff’s operations chief on 16 January 1918, ‘that the French will run themselves off their legs and hurry at once to the help of the Entente comrades.’ This was unfair to the actions Pétain took in the early days of the Michael offensive, but is a very fair appreciation of the risks.

II

The events between 21 March, when the Germans attacked the British Third and Fifth armies between Arras and St Quentin, and 26 March, when at Doullens the command relationship was given its final form with the appointment of General Ferdinand Foch to coordinate the allied armies, may be followed in the official histories and elsewhere. They do not need repeating here, and are summarised in table 8.1. The salient points are that Pétain moved more troops and more rapidly than he is given credit for, and that Haig’s responsibility for creating the last – successful – command relationship is less than is generally believed. Initially, Foch was given the task, although without powers to carry it out, of coordinating the allied armies on the Western Front. The form of words agreed after a short discussion (see figure 8.1) was imprecise and weak. Moreover, since only the British and the French were present, the reference to Allied armies and to the whole Western Front was somewhat premature. Nonetheless, Foch immediately set about visiting all the commanders and making his views known. Although the battle continued

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23 Foch, Journées, 15 March 1918, 414/AP/10, AN; Haig diary, 14 March 1918, WO 256/28.
24 Haig diary, 2 and 20 March 1918, WO 256/28.
German officials until 5 April, it had run out of steam by the time Foch took
charge; and he had no troops under his direct control. It cannot be said,
therefore, that he had any immediate effect, other than psychological.

Yet Foch seized the psychological moment when the British were forced
to request unity of command. The French realised that the request for a
French allied commander-in-chief would have to come from the British.
They could not impose it. Clemenceau knew that only the German guns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>British action in response to German advances</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>French action and troop arrivals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>04.40</td>
<td>German attack begins</td>
<td>23.45</td>
<td>Pétain alerts 3 divisions of V Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germans advance 4.5 miles to Crozat Canal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>00.40</td>
<td>Haig requests help (Hypothesis A)</td>
<td>p.m.</td>
<td>125 DI in action</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germans create gaps in British line between corps</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 divisions arrived by road</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>Haig meets Pétain; asks for 20 divs. about Amiens</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>Pétain informs Poincaré the British are retiring too far</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Crozat Canal lost</td>
<td>23.00</td>
<td>French Third Army takes over as far as Péronne; GAR created (Third and First Armies) under Fayolle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germans enter Ham and Péronne</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 divisions arrived: 3 by road, 4 by rail</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.30</td>
<td>Milner leaves for France</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Pétain informs Clemenceau that Haig is retiring northwards; defeat will be the fault of the British</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>GHQ asks Wilson to come to France</td>
<td>17.30</td>
<td>Foch telephones Wilson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.35</td>
<td>Haig meets Pétain; asks for large force; phantom telegram</td>
<td></td>
<td>No new divisions arrived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23.00</td>
<td>Germans cross the Somme</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>Haig gives Weygand note requesting 20 divisions</td>
<td>8 divisions arrived: 2 by road, 6 by rail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germans capture Nesle, Noyon and Bapaume</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 divisions arrived by road (+ another 7 on 27th and another 4 on 28th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>3 Doullens meetings: Foch given coordinating role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
could make the British accept it. And the American attitude, even though they were absent at Doullens, was clear. General Tasker H. Bliss, the American representative at Versailles, had concluded soon after his arrival in Europe, that the USA should make known its ‘great interest ... in securing absolute unity of military control, even if this should demand unity of command’.  

There was little opposition in London. Lloyd George had already tried once to subordinate Haig to a French general. The German breaking of

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the joint line provided an opportunity to create unified command that
would have been impossible previously. As he told the American
Ambassador and Newton D. Baker, Secretary of State for War, on
23 March: ‘If the cabinet two weeks ago had suggested placing the British
Army under a foreign general, it would have fallen.’

Now the crisis gave
Lloyd George the chance to reveal his leadership qualities in this his
‘greatest hour’. Hankey believed that it was the ability to snatch advantage
from disaster that was one of Lloyd George’s peculiar gifts. Thus ‘from the
catastrophe of the 21st of March he drew the Unified Command and the
immense American reinforcement’. 

Milner, too, seized the psychological moment. Lloyd George chose
Milner, not the Secretary of State for War, Lord Derby, to go over to
France to find out what was happening. As the minister delegated to act at
Versailles, Milner was the obvious choice, and he was more in tune with
Lloyd George’s ideas than Derby, who had vacillated over the dismissal of
Robertson. Furthermore, Milner had not been involved in the Nivelle
fiasco (he had been on the mission to Russia when the Calais conference
took place). He had not been present at Rapallo, but was strongly in
favour of the general reserve. Thus he was not tainted by any of the earlier
machinations to subordinate Haig to the French, yet he was in favour of
allied action and knew Clemenceau personally. Spears sent a telegram on
23 March to Milner, asking him to come over.

The CIGS’s attitude was more equivocal. After talking with
Clemenceau on 19 November 1917 about the Rapallo agreement,
Wilson judged unity of command ‘an impossible thing’. Yet, the next
day, Clemenceau said that he wanted two men to ‘run the whole thing’,
himself and Wilson. By 28 January – after thinking about the general
reserve – Wilson concluded ‘that all the Reserve must be under one
authority . . . for the first time in the war I was wavering about a
C.in.C’. Yet, overall, London would be in favour of an allied comman
der if the circumstances were right.

29 Burton J. Hendrick (ed.), The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page, 3 vols. (Garden City, NY:
Doubleday, Page & Co., 1926), II: 366. See also letter, Newton D. Baker to General
Tasker H. Bliss, 24 October 1922, cited in Frederick Palmer, Newton D. Baker: America
30 Lord Beaverbrook, statement in the House of Lords on the death of Earl Lloyd George of
Dwyfor, 28 March 1944, reprinted in Beaverbrook, Men and Power 1917–1918 (London:
Hutchinson, 1956), 416–18, appendix VII.
31 Hankey to Churchill, 8 December 1926, cited in Robin Prior, Churchill’s ‘World Crisis’ as
32 Spears diary, 23 March 1918, SPRS, acc. 1048, box 4, CCC.
33 Wilson diary, 19 and 20 November 1917, 28 January 1918, Wilson mss., DS/Misc/80,
IWM.
As for the British command in France, Hanks’ judgement is that Haig was the ‘last one on board’.

Haig’s claim to be responsible for Foch’s appointment may be dismissed. The manuscript of his diary makes no mention of a middle-of-the-night telegram to London following his 11 p.m. meeting with Pétain on 24 March, in which he requested the ‘supreme command’ be given to ‘Foch or some other determined General who would fight’. It is an addition to the later typescript version of the diary. Since the later version mentions Wilson and the Secretary of State, referred to on the 25th as the CIGS and Milner, the post-hoc addition lacks credibility. Milner did not become Secretary of State until 19 April. What is more, the European War Secret Telegrams Series contains no such telegram. Finally, in any case, Milner had already left for France at 12.50 on the 24th, as a result of Lloyd George’s fears, and had gone first to GHQ where he arrived about 6.30; and Haig’s chief of staff, General H. A. Lawrence had already alerted Wilson by telephone in the early evening. Since Wilson had already decided to go over to France, the telegram, even if it had been sent as claimed, was redundant. Milner was already in France, and Wilson had already decided to cross the Channel also. The only evidence for Haig’s role in summoning British politicians to impose Foch as allied commander is his own account, clearly amended after the event.

This leaves the question of why Haig insisted so strongly on claiming the responsibility for summoning the British authorities to France to impose unity of command on the French. Put this way, the answer is plain. The blame for what happened on 21 March and succeeding days is placed on French shoulders, for demanding that their line be relieved and for failing to come to his aid quickly enough – for which Lloyd George also proved a useful whipping boy. Haig’s ‘unselfish’ initiative could then claim some of the glory for the final victories. If Haig could not have been generalissimo himself – even with his belief in his own powers and divine help, he would have quailed at taking the responsibility for the French armies as well as his own – then he

35 Typescript diary, 24 March 1918, WO 256/28; manuscript in Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 97. For a more extended analysis of the differences between the original manuscript and the copy of the typescript in the PRO, see Elizabeth Greenhalgh, ‘Myth and Memory: Sir Douglas Haig and the Imposition of Allied Unified Command in March 1918’, Journal of Military History 68: 2 (July 2004), 771–820.
37 ‘Memorandum by Lord Milner on his Visit to France, Including the Conference at Doullens, March 26, 1918’, 27 March 1918, CAB 28/3, IC 53.
38 Wilson diary, 24 March 1918.
39 For the postwar life of Haig’s version of events, see Greenhalgh, ‘Myth and Memory’.
took the credit for the next best thing: the initiative that put Foch in place. Importantly, this reveals that Haig believed that the post had had some value in winning the war. Certainly it freed Haig from political control from London. He might well have been prevented from undertaking some of the final victorious operations during the last weeks of the war, if Foch had not provided a buffer between him and Lloyd George.

In sum, on the British side, events had forced a situation where the decision reached at Doullens was the only possible timely solution to the disaster that would ensue if the Germans succeeded in separating French and British forces. Separation would have given the enemy the opportunity to defeat the French whilst keeping the BEF bottled up against the Channel ports. The British would then have been forced to sue for terms. Instead, Milner enacted, and Haig consented to, a command solution that gave Foch the task of coordinating Allied actions, but without the powers to carry out the task. In Bliss’ opinion, this defective solution was the result of the British military’s repeated refusal to accept a French generalissimo: ‘They were not prepared to do it at Doullens and they did not do it; all that they did was to arrange that somebody should share their responsibility … [Foch knew] that the power to coordinate without the power to give the necessary orders to effect the coordination meant nothing’.

The fact that Haig accepted Foch as a solution to an emergency would influence the way in which the relationship evolved. However, the politicians were firmly in charge. Clemenceau made it his business to visit the front and to see what was happening. Milner and Lloyd George were happy to subordinate Haig. This had been the prime minister’s aim from the start, and Milner (as will be seen) was prepared to allow Foch the benefit of the doubt in the disputes that lay ahead. Foch himself found that his scrap of paper signed at Doullens was inadequate, and he lobbied strongly for a change.

III

Foch had acted in a coordinating role before. In October 1914 Joffre had appointed him as his adjoint (deputy) to coordinate the Belgian, British and French troops during the First Ypres battle. In similar circumstances he had coordinated the scrambled defence to resist the German attempts

to reach the Channel ports. Then too, as he told journalist Raymond Recouly after the war, ‘theoretically’ he had held no authority over Belgian and British armies, but ‘these two armies acted, in fact, in conformity with [his] views and directives’.41 Before Doullens Foch told Wilson that he wanted a similar position, not simply appointed by Joffre’s successor but strengthened by the authorisation of both London and Paris.42

Armed with his written authorisation Foch began immediately to carry out his two ‘simple ideas’: to maintain the contact between British and French troops, and to defend Amiens. With a small, improvised staff, he visited all the army commanders, including Gough, and Fayolle. He insisted that no more ground be ceded. His confidence and moral strength gave him greater authority than his piece of paper.

Despite Foch’s energy, the Germans did make further gains, although Amiens did not fall. However, it was less Foch’s coordination than the German onslaught having run out of steam that allowed the British and French to reorganise. The liaison with Foch was set up very quickly. On 30 March Brigadier-General C. J. C. Grant and Colonel Eric Dillon (from British Mission at GQG) were attached to Foch’s headquarters as liaison officers. The former liaised between Foch and Wilson (sending regular reports to the DMO at the War Office), and the latter between Foch and Haig. Dillon had been with Foch’s Northern Army Group on the Somme in 1916. Colonel F. Cavendish, who was also an experienced liaison officer, acted between Haig and Fayolle, commander of the Reserve Group of Armies. With an organised liaison service, Foch’s time could be used more efficiently than in travelling around and speaking personally to commanding officers.

Then Foch began a sustained campaign to have his powers increased. Coordination was insufficient. It was necessary to ‘direct’ operations, to issue ‘directives’ and to ensure that they were carried out. He wrote to Clemenceau in these terms on 31 March, and twice on 1 April. When urgent decisions required rapid execution, clearly it was dangerous to have to persuade rather than to direct. Equally, if reserves were to be gathered and plans made for a counter-offensive now that there was a lull in the battle, the power to direct would be vital, given Foch’s unhappy experience as president of the Executive War Board.

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42 Milner, ‘Memorandum’, p. 3.
Clemenceau was not unwilling to extend Foch’s remit. He had seen the problem at first hand during an exciting trip to the front with Churchill.\(^{43}\) Clemenceau had intervened over a dispute about liaison at the juncture of the French and British troops, and Churchill and Clemenceau agreed that something had to be done about Foch’s position and his inability to give orders. (Clemenceau told the Chamber of Deputies’ Army Commission that Foch did not ‘dare’ give any orders to the British – he simply wrote ‘extremely deferential telegrams’, expressing his wishes and the ‘necessity’ for such and such an action.)\(^{44}\) Clemenceau’s chef de cabinet, General Mordacq, reported that the British were unhappy about French command; and, after a meeting with Foch on 1 April, Clemenceau became convinced that Foch did not want more power for selfish reasons, but that he was correct for strategic reasons.\(^{45}\) Accordingly, Clemenceau sent a message to Lloyd George via Churchill that the British premier should come over to France for a meeting, since ‘[c]onsiderable difficulties about the high command have arisen’, and matters at the point of juncture were ‘delicate’.\(^{46}\)

The cabinet seemed convinced, when they discussed Clemenceau’s invitation, that both Pétain and Haig ‘should conform to the instructions of General Foch’. Milner favoured ‘fortifying’ Foch’s position,\(^{47}\) so he was not wedded to the formula that he had helped bring about in Doullens. The only dissenter was Wilson, who pointed out – wrongly – that Foch himself ‘probably did not require’ any extension of his powers. Wilson’s objections derived perhaps from a wish not to diminish his own influence; and the cabinet decided that the decision as to whether Foch’s powers should be increased from coordination to the right to issue orders should be left to the prime minister’s discretion, after due consultation with Haig.\(^{48}\)

As for the attitudes of the two national commanders, Pétain was the less happy. Haig had been deeply shocked by the German breakthrough – Wilson had described him as being ‘cowed’\(^{49}\) – and he knew that the Germans would try again against his front. All the reasons that had dictated his acceptance of Foch at Doullens remained in place. Pétain and GQG, on the other hand, disliked Foch’s ‘control of operations’ and

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\(^{44}\) Commission de l’Armée, Audition des ministres [Clemenceau and Loucheur], 5 April 1918, C7500, vol. 20, AN.


\(^{46}\) Churchill to Lloyd George, 2 April 1918, Lloyd George papers, F/8/2/18, HLRO.

\(^{47}\) Wilson diary, 2 April 1918.

\(^{48}\) Minutes, War Cabinet 380, 2 April 1918, CAB 23/5.

\(^{49}\) Wilson diary, 25 March 1918.
there was ‘a good deal of feeling about Foch’s appointment’.\(^{50}\) Haig would not object to an increase in powers that would enable Foch to order Pétain to come to the BEF’s aid. Indeed, Wilson believed, after talking with Churchill, that Clemenceau wanted to enable Foch ‘to coerce Pétain’.\(^{51}\) This attitude was confirmed postwar in the GHQ ‘Notes on Operations’. It stated that GQG did not recognise Foch’s position as generalissimo on the Western Front ‘at once wholeheartedly’, and so it ‘became necessary to define his position more clearly’.\(^{52}\)

Hence there was little disagreement when the parties met at Beauvais on 3 April to amend Foch’s powers. The Americans, indeed, were present on this occasion and pushing for unity of command very strongly.\(^{53}\) Lloyd George arrived late as he had been touring the British front, and seemed ‘thoroughly frightened’ by what he had seen, according to Haig. After some discussion, Foch was given the ‘strategic direction of military operations’; the agreement was extended to American troops; and the national commanders were given the right of appeal to their respective government if they believed that Foch’s orders would endanger their army.

Indeed, the French had tried to be tactful, deliberately setting aside the terms ‘commandement en chef’ or generalissimo, as being likely to cause resentment, in favour of ‘strategic direction’.\(^{54}\) (They had even ordered the censors to suppress press speculation about unity of command, and had forbidden the publication of the Doullens agreement until 30 March, after it had appeared in Britain.)\(^{55}\) The British military knew that the BEF would continue to require support, which was more likely, they believed, to be given by Foch than by Pétain. The French military were the most unhappy; but Mordacq assured Clemenceau that Pétain would ‘put aside all questions of amour-propre in order to help Foch loyally’.\(^{56}\) Even Pétain was happy to see Haig under French orders because he believed

\(^{50}\) Clive diary, 31 March 1918, CAB 45/201. See also Grant, Diary I, 3 April 1918, WO 106/1456. There are two versions of General Grant’s diary in this series. They are not contradictory, but they contain different details. The first (headed simply ‘1918’) will be referred to hereafter as Diary I. The second (headed ‘Copy Notes from a Diary March 29th to August 1918’) will be referred to as Diary II.

\(^{51}\) Wilson diary, 3 April 1918.

\(^{52}\) ‘Notes on the Operations on Western Front after Sir D. Haig became Commander in Chief December 1915’, p. 61, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 213a. This was annotated by Haig on 30 January 1920 as ‘correct in every particular’.


\(^{54}\) Mordacq, Ministère Clemenceau, I: 265.


\(^{56}\) Mordacq, Ministère Clemenceau, I: 258.
GHQ badly organised, having failed to defend the Somme and never carrying out what it promised to do.57

The final adjustment to the command relationship came over the matter of Foch’s title. Clearly, in a hierarchical organisation, Foch had to sign his orders with some title conferring authority. He wrote to Clemenceau on 5 April about the problem, and spoke with Clemenceau

57 Ibid., 267–8.

Figure 8.2 Facsimile of the Beauvais Agreement, 3 April 1918.
and Mordacq on 6 and 8 April. His formula was ‘commandant des arméesalliées’. His liaison officer, General Charles Grant, recommended that Foch be given the title of ‘Commander-in-Chief in France’, so that he could issue orders directly to avoid the current ‘complicated’ channel of communication with the French armies in the field. According to Spears, Clemenceau would not permit Lloyd George to cede the responsibility for the allied armies to Foch but at the same time deny him the name or any power. If Foch was to have the responsibility, Clemenceau believed he should also have both name and power. Nonetheless, just before the politicians met at Abbeville to settle the question of the disposition of reserve troops, Foch sent yet another telegram to Clemenceau, asking for a response to his request to know what title he should use in his official correspondence. Subordinates ‘did not know what his powers were’, he wrote, and so delays and indecisiveness resulted.

The War Cabinet in London had discussed the matter on 11 April. Wilson reported Foch as saying that he must have a title: ‘At present he said he was merely “Monsieur Foch très bien connu, mais toujours Monsieur Foch” [Mr Foch, very well known, but still Mr Foch]’. The title ‘Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in France’ was rejected, as Curzon and Lloyd George had recently spoken in Parliament about why Foch could not be Generalissimo. Their final decision, subject to the King’s approval, was ‘General-in-Chief’. The distinction between Commander in Chief and General in Chief may seem small; and the cabinet appears to have been unnecessarily fearful of British public reaction. (A Daily Mirror leader of 6 April had written, for example, that it was ‘time for complete unity and concentration of purpose’ and that General Foch could be trusted.) The matter was settled on 14 April, when Clemenceau wired Foch that Lloyd George had agreed to ‘Général en chef des armées alliées’. The result of all this had already been summed up in Rawlinson’s diary: ‘Foch is now generalissimo and we must therefore obey his orders.’

59 Grant report to DMO, 10 April 1918, WO 158/84, pt 1.
60 Spears to General Maurice [DMO at WO], LSO 254, 10 April 1918, Spears papers, 1/13/2, LHCMA.
61 Telegram, Foch to Clemenceau, 9.45, 14 April 1918, AFGG 6/1, annex 1707.
62 Minutes, War Cabinet 389(a), 11 April 1918, CAB 23/14.
63 Telegram, Lloyd George to Clemenceau, 12 April 1918, F/50/2/29; Telegram, Clemenceau to Foch, 16.45, 14 April 1918, AFGG 6/1, annex 1705; Grant Diary I, 14 April 1918, WO 106/1456.
64 Rawlinson diary, 10 April 1918, RWLN 1/9.
As for Foch, notwithstanding his repeated pushing to know what title he should use, he recognised that he had been demanding only a ‘proce-
dural’ piece of paper. His power to command derived solely from the
confidence placed in him by the Allied armies and from the agreement
with and between them. He told Recouly that ‘persuasion’ was the only
possible method, persuasion being ‘infinitely more useful, more effective
than severity’. Categorical orders could not be handed down – instead the
giver had to get them accepted willingly. There was no other way to
command.  

IV

But before agreement was reached on Foch’s title, the Battle of the Lys
(9–29 April) had begun. Like the first, Ludendorff’s second offensive had
been expected. It was launched against the British lines once again, but
this time further north in Flanders. This time, however, a supreme
commander was in place. Furthermore, a more senior British liaison
officer was appointed to Foch’s staff on 12 April. This was General Sir
John DuCane.

No official correspondence about this appointment seems to have
survived. The official history states it was Haig’s idea, but Wilson’s
diary suggests that it was his own proposal because Haig failed to un-
derstand the situation. In fact DuCane duplicated the liaison with the CIGS
already carried out by Grant, but Haig told him at the outset that ‘it was of
the first importance to keep our end up’ with Foch. 66 Wherever the idea
originated, Foch rejected it at first. He preferred working informally and
with a small staff. He had been ‘very rude’ to Cavendish when he first
appeared at his headquarters, saying that he did not want any foreign
officers. However, he was prevailed upon to accept. DuCane himself
believed that he was taken from his command of XV Corps on the Lys
because GHQ wanted him ‘to stick up’ to Foch. 67

The German attack threw up two related problems that would bedevil
the command relationship until July when the last enemy offensive took
place and the Allied counter-offensives began. The two problems were
the result of diminished manpower resources. First, neither Haig nor

65 Maréchal Foch, Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la guerre de 1914–1918, 2 vols. (Paris:
Plon, 1931), II: 44; Recouly, Mémorial de Foch, 18–19.
66 Lieutenant-General Sir J. P. DuCane, Marshal Foch (privately printed, 1920), IWM,
p. 8. DuCane’s correspondence with Wilson is in Wilson papers, 73/1/13/HHW 2/36–43,
IWM.
67 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, II: 1, n. 1; Grant Diaries I and II, 9 and 12–14 April
1918, WO 106/1456; Weygand, Idéal vécu, 509–10; DuCane, Foch, 1, 5.
Pétain was satisfied that Foch was dealing fairly with them in allocating reserves to support their front. Second, in order to create a reserve force for the counter-attacks that Foch deemed vital, fresh divisions had to be taken into reserve by using tired troops to hold quiet parts of the line (the so-called ‘roulement’) and by feeding American troops into the Allied line.

The twin problem of how to use reserve troops for defence and how to conserve reserve troops for the attack is illustrated nicely by the exchange of correspondence between Foch and Haig before the Battle of the Lys began. Haig had written to Foch on 6 April with three alternative proposals for parrying the expected attack: either put in a French attack to relieve pressure on the British; or relieve four British divisions south of the Somme; or put four French divisions as a reserve around Saint-Pol behind the British front. Wilson’s letter of the next day warned Foch of the massing German divisions which the weakened BEF would be unable to withstand. Foch was thinking offensively, however. He had already issued his Directive No. 2 immediately after the Beauvais conference on 3 April. This spoke of two attacks, French and British, to free Amiens and the railway communications. He needed to build up reserves for any attack and would not relieve any British divisions. He also argued hard and long that the British should not reduce the number of divisions but rather make up their depleted numbers with reinforcements from home – another reason for not relieving British divisions in the front line.68

Notwithstanding this refusal, Foch ordered Pétain on 7 April to place four infantry and three cavalry divisions in the British zone west of Amiens. Once this was carried out, the French had only eighteen divisions left in line between the Oise and the Somme (more or less the front that the British had taken over in January and abandoned in March), with ten divisions in army or army group reserve and a further ten plus six cavalry divisions in the CinC’s reserve. For the remainder of the front from the Oise to Switzerland, there were forty-six divisions in line with twelve in reserve.69 Haig would have preferred the French reserves to be placed further north around Saint-Pol, but behind Amiens they were well placed to intervene on either the British or the French front. The disadvantage of the area behind Amiens was the overcrowding. Rawlinson claimed that it was ‘impossible’ to put the French troops there. All the billets and all the roads were required for Fourth Army, but since the

68 Haig to Foch, 6 April 1918, WO 158/28/22, and 15N 10/12, AG; Wilson to Foch, 7 April 1918, Wilson mss. 2/24/A/7, and 15N 10/14; Foch’s General Directive No. 2, 3 April 1918, is reproduced in Edmunds, France and Belgium 1918, II: 116–17, and AFGG 6/1, annex 1374.
69 AFGG 6/1, 427, n. 4.
‘Generalissimo’ had put the order in writing it had to be obeyed – ‘an infernal nuisance [sic]’.  

Haig thought that Foch was not doing enough and so asked the CIGS to come and see Foch. Wilson was given ‘full powers’ by the cabinet to do what he thought best. Milner advised him thus: ‘I should regard it as a great misfortune if there had to be appeal to the Supreme War Council against Foch . . . I would rather risk a mistake being made by a single directing mind than face the certainty of confusion and possibly fatal compromise, in which, as I believe, a Council of War – composed of civilians – would result.’ Milner was undoubtedly correct. Waging war, especially when under enormous enemy pressure, was impossible by a committee meeting neither in permanent session nor where the action was. In any case, as Milner realised, the French representative on the Supreme War Council would be unlikely to allocate greater reserves to the British front than Foch believed he could spare – quite the reverse. Wilson agreed ‘absolutely’ with Milner, adding that ‘nothing short of the conviction of a final and irrevocable disaster’ would force him to such an appeal. Given that both Wilson and Milner had a low opinion of Haig (Milner thought he should be removed), it was more likely that they would support Foch in any dispute with Haig.

Thus, despite the movement northwards of more French reserves, the command relationship could not be said to be working smoothly when eight German divisions attacked between Béthune and Armentières, using gas shells and 900 guns, against one Portuguese and two British divisions. The enemy got across the Lys on the 9th, the next day the British abandoned Armentières, and by the 11th the Germans were within ten miles of the vital Hazebrouck rail centre. Once again Haig called for French support. Foch refused either to relieve or to use French troops that were scheduled to put in a counter-attack further south on the 12th, even though Rawlinson’s Fourth Army had pulled out of the attack because he no longer had sufficient troops, having sent all possible northwards. What Foch did was to direct Pétain to send his Fifth and Tenth armies across the Somme, which did not please Rawlinson because of the confusion behind the lines. Marching zones for French troops were to be cleared west of Amiens, but this was done slowly and grudgingly.

Haig wrote to Foch on 11 April, asking for four French divisions to be placed around Saint-Omer and Dunkirk. Also, on that day, Haig

70 Rawlinson diary, 7 and 9 April 1918, RWLN 1/9.
71 Wilson diary, 8 April 1918.
72 Milner to Wilson, and Wilson to Milner, 8 April 1918, Milner mss., dep. 682, fos. 216–20, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
73 Haig to Foch, 11 April 1918, WO 158/28/40, and 15N 10/22.
issued his famous ‘backs to the wall’ order of the day. Liddell Hart thought that it was intended to be a ‘thunderclap’ to the British public, and certainly some found it inspirational. Vera Brittain in her hospital at Etaples was inspired, despite her fatigue, to go on treating the floods of wounded; Edmonds wrote of a ‘strong wave of determination not to be beaten’. On the other hand, troops in the line were unlikely to have been collected in one spot for the order to be read out to them and, as one survivor recalled, those who did hear it had ‘only one comment and that a rude one’. The Royal Welch Fusiliers were saying: ‘The C.-in-C. tells us “our backs are to the wall.” His men are asking, “Where’s the . . . [sic] wall?”’ The ‘inspirational’ order that Edmonds recorded as being found amongst 1 Australian Division – ‘If the section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here’, and ‘Should any man through shell shock or any other cause attempt to surrender he will remain here dead’ – should surely be read as mocking, and not taken literally (especially given the nationality of the unit involved).

In my view, Haig’s intention in issuing this order was directed less at his troops than at Foch. Most accounts omit the paragraph that precedes the ‘backs to the wall’. This reads: ‘Many amongst us are now tired. To those I would say that Victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest. The French Army is moving rapidly and in great force to our support.’ Haig’s former head of intelligence thought this a rash claim: if the French were indeed hurrying, they would be arriving at the same time as the order reached the troops; and, if they were not, raising false hopes would have a bad effect. The order would certainly hearten the Germans. This indicates that Haig was aiming to pressure Foch to do more, to make good the claim that the French Army was moving rapidly to support the British line. Indubitably, Haig did not believe that the French were doing enough; and his use of the phrase ‘French Army’ – did he mean to imply all of it? – is mere hyperbole.

Foch knew the exhausted state of the British troops from liaison officers’ reports. The head of the MMF stated that the untrained reinforcements lacked competent officers. Although the morale of the troops was

76 Edmonds, *France and Belgium 1918*, II: 249, n. 3.
excellent, higher command was totally overwhelmed. Foch also knew from the French intelligence service that there were 202 German divisions on the Western Front (including 40 in rear areas, the whereabouts of only 18 of which were known). So, despite Haig’s comment that Foch was being ‘most selfish and obstinate’ and that he (Foch) was afraid to put French divisions in the line because he feared they would not fight, the allied commander took several steps on 12 April to alleviate the situation. He put under Plumer’s orders two French infantry divisions and the 2 Cavalry Corps, whose concentration west of Saint-Omer was complete by the 14th, after they had covered 200–20 kilometres in seventy hours. The role of the French cavalry was to maintain contact between the two threatened British armies. Foch also asked the Belgians to extend their right and lend Plumer two infantry and two cavalry divisions. In addition, Foch put Tenth Army under his own rather than Pétain’s command, and sent Colonel Desticker, a member of his staff, to Plumer’s HQ to act as direct liaison officer between Plumer and Foch. (Foch had known Plumer in Italy in 1917 after Caporetto.)

Plumer had acted also to shorten his line. With Haig’s agreement, he began to withdraw his left on 12 April from the Passchendaele ridge which had been won at such enormous cost a few months earlier. (Plumer did not, therefore, have to obey the previous day’s ‘backs to the wall’ injunction.) With the Belgians keeping in line, and flooding started around Dunkirk, the front was beginning to stabilise, even though the Germans took Wytschaete on 14 April.

Foch had done enough, therefore. The Germans were halted. Yet the loss in such short order of the British gains of 1916 on the Somme, followed by the loss of 1917’s gains at Passchendaele and Cambrai, cannot have been anything other than bitter for Haig. As Grant remarked, ‘Sir Douglas’ pride is already hurt, but it is evident that Foch means to exercise a real command.’ Although French reserves were skewed towards the north, and were positioned for more than one course of action – in any case, there probably was not room (or railway or road capacity) to have many more French troops milling about – Haig was not satisfied. He was ‘raging’ and ‘acting like a schoolboy’ because Foch would not do more. A conference was convened at Abbeville on 14 April to settle the issue.

79 Chef, Mission Militaire Française #5700, 12 April 1918, 15N 10; Chef d’Escadron de Gourcuff, report #476, 13 April 1918, 17N 362.
80 Compte-rendus des renseignements du 2e Bureau du GQG, #1394, 12 April 1918, 15N 5.
81 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, II: 276.
82 Grant Diary II, 14 April 1918, WO 106/1456.
83 Spears diary, 14 April 1918, Spears papers, acc. 1048, box 4.
There was no meeting of minds. Haig demanded reserves to support the British line between Arras and the Somme, and Foch refused to relieve units during a battle. Haig’s intelligence assessment (mentioned but not described in Edmonds) claimed that, unless the British armies were supported and relieved, they would be defeated in the third battle that was bound to be launched against them. Whereupon the Germans would sue for a victor’s peace, and the BEF would have been sacrificed, and sacrificed in vain.

Foch’s response was merely to reiterate catchphrases; ‘no relief during a battle’ and ‘never give up ground’. DuCane thought this a very poor performance (because he did not yet know or understand Foch). Foch’s intention was to hold on to some reserves so as to be able to maintain the integrity of the front at the junction of the French and British armies, where the Germans might still attack again in force. He did, however, offer one division (not the four Haig had requested) of Tenth Army, and he asked the Belgians to extend their line so as to join up with the British line, shortened since withdrawing from the Passchendaele ridge.

Milner and especially Wilson who had both come to France for the conference wished to protect the Channel ports and to shorten the British front still further by flooding the front from Saint-Omer to the coast. They pressed this argument at further meetings on 15, 16 and 17 April. On 22 April the War Cabinet would go so far as to discuss abandoning Dunkirk. Yet Foch was adamant that he would fight for the ports as he had fought for them in 1914. Neither Wilson, nor Haig nor Plumer, believed, however, that the British line could be held for ‘much longer’ against possibly thirty more German divisions with the troops currently available.

Despite his exhortations to ‘cramponnez partout [hold on everywhere]’, Foch had been moving French units northwards. He acknowledged to himself that the situation in Flanders was ‘very serious’, even while giving an impression of ‘serene confidence’ to Clemenceau.

84 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, II: 314; DuCane, Foch, 90–1; Haig’s request for French divisions is in GQGA, Opérations, 15N 10/42, and WO 158/72/25.
85 ‘Note remise par le maréchal Haig à la conférence d’Abbeville du 14 avril 1918’, AFGG 6/1, annex 1698.
86 DuCane, Foch, 12–14. See also Grant report to DMO, 16 April 1918, WO 158/84, pt 1; and Weygand, Idéal vécu, 507–8.
87 Foch to Gillain [chef d’état-major général belge], and Foch to Haig, 14 April 1918, AFGG 6/1, annexes 1708, 1709.
88 Minutes, War Cabinet 396, 22 April 1918, CAB 23/6.
90 Journées, 17 April 1918, Foch papers, 414/AP/10; Mordacq, Ministère Clemenceau, I: 303.
going to see the situation for himself and spending the night of 16/17 April at Plumer’s HQ, he decided to send seven French divisions immediately to Flanders to join the two British that Plumer had gained by withdrawing from Passchendaele ridge.

Thus, Foch contained the situation. The German attacks were diminishing in force (German Sixth Army warned Ludendorff as early as the middle of April that the offensive was coming to a halt, that the troops would not attack);91 British reinforcements (especially Canadian and Australian) were arriving; the Belgians were cooperating; preparations for inundations were ordered even though not (for the most part) carried out; and Foch authorised talks between Haig and Admiral Ronarc’h, commander at Dunkirk, about the measures to be put in place in case the destruction of the port was required. On the negative side of the equation, Pétain ‘objected’ to having his divisions sent up to Flanders. He told Clive that Foch was ‘too optimistic’, because in 1914 it was the Russian attack in the east that had stopped the Germans in Flanders. No such deliverance could be expected now.92 Moreover, feeding and supplying the French infantry and cavalry horses in the crowded area in Flanders was becoming a problem. Foch was receiving reports that Haig’s position was shaky, and that the quality of reinforcements for the ‘very tired’ British troops was ‘mediocre’.93 Eventually, however, the Germans realised their error and abandoned all their gains in the salient that they had created.

It was now Pétain’s turn to protest about his treatment. He had decided to create the Département de l’Armée du Nord (DAN) to take over responsibility for Calais and Dunkirk on 17 April. But Foch not Pétain was the ultimate authority. This group, consisting of a cavalry corps and XXXVI CA (six infantry divisions), was placed under Plumer’s orders and by 21 April was in position in the line of hills south of Ypres.

Pétain protested strongly. Since 21 March, he wrote to Foch, despite the risk of German attacks on his own front, he had made available forty-seven divisions to support the British front; he had created the DAN and the Army Reserve Group under Fayolle (with an average of sixteen divisions in the front and eight divisions in the second line); he had allocated four divisions to Tenth Army so as to support either Third or

92 Clive diary, 18 April 1918, and conversation with Pétain, same date, in notebook, CAB 45/201.
93 La Panouse to Foch, 20 April 1918, 15N 42, [d]7; Compte-rendu du Col. Desticker, 13 April 1918, 15N 10/36; Chef d’Escadron de Gourcuff, reports # 476 and 480, 13 and 17 April 1918, 17N 362, [d]2.
First armies; he had allocated four divisions in the Fifth Army to support either Fourth or Third Army; and a further six or so divisions were echeloned between Beauvais and the River Oise as a reserve for any of the above formations. The French Army asked only to fight, he went on, whether on the morrow on the British front, or the day after on the Belgian front, just as they had fought yesterday on the Italian front. However, the Army ‘wanted to be sure that the British Army and Empire, like the French Army and France, had made up their minds to make the maximum effort’. All that remained in his reserve were four divisions for the Northern Army Group and nine for the eastern army group.

Pétain’s woes were increased by further enemy attacks. After a lull between 19 and 24 April, the German Alpine Corps renewed the offensive on the 25th against the Mont Kemmel, now held by 28 DI. The French division was wiped out, to the great scorn of GHQ who believed that the French had simply run away. Haig wrote to his wife that night: ‘The French lost Kemmel – a position of extraordinary strength. How they managed it I don’t know – They are arranging to retake it.’ Yet there was probably a subconscious sense of relief that the British were not the only ones ever to be beaten back; and the Australians had managed a success by retaking, also on the 25th, Villers Bretonneux further south which the Germans had captured the previous day. On 29 April the enemy abandoned the offensive, and the Battle of the Lys was over.

Since Haig had complained that the French were not doing enough, and Pétain had complained that they were doing too much, it may be assumed that Foch had got it about right. Certainly he had done enough to score a defensive success. Clearly, however, neither national commander was happy with the command relationship. Both prime ministers and Milner, on the other hand, were determined that civilian control should prevail and that the mechanism of unified command should work. That mechanism might be working, to the extent that the Germans had been repulsed, but it was not popular with the generals.

V

The Allies had now resisted two great enemy attacks. The first had brought about unity of command, but the second had revealed that supreme command was no panacea. The arguments were intensified by

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94 Pétain to Foch, 24 April 1918, AFGG 6/1, annex 1906. Emphasis in the original.
95 Pedroncini, Pétain, 353.
96 Letter, Haig to Lady Haig, 25 April 1918, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 150.
the scale of the casualties. The French had suffered 92,000 casualties and the British, who had borne the brunt of the enemy attacks, about 230,000. 97 Haig proposed reducing five divisions to cadre strength only, with their remaining combatant strength distributed to other divisions.

Because of the two salients that the enemy attacks had created, the front was now much longer but there were fewer men to hold it. Between 21 March and 30 April the total allied line had increased by 55 km. The British share of the line had decreased by 45 km and the French line had increased by 97 km (the Belgians taking the remaining 3 extra kilometres). 98 The French efforts had left their army skewed towards the north. Hindenburg commented that the French had saved the situation with ‘their massed attacks and skilful artillery’: ‘Twice had England been saved by France at a moment of extreme crisis.’ 99

The consequence of all this was a huge undercurrent of ill will on both sides. British resentment was unfounded. Haig’s postwar ‘Notes on Operations’ states that ‘between the 21st March and 15th April, the French did practically nothing and took no part in the fighting’ 100 – which is grotesquely unfair. Some at least of the 92,000 casualties must have been fighting hard. GHQ’s scorn when the French lost Kemmel led to the ridiculous situation that they declined to hand over Villers Bretonneux when the French agreed to relieve II Corps. GHQ believed that the French would lose again what the Australians had just captured. 101

On the other hand, the tone in the French press became distinctly chilly. 102 On a trip to the front for the Chamber of Deputies’ Army Commission, Abel Ferry was deeply affected by a group of about a hundred poilus who demanded to know when the peace would come: ‘It’s always us who pay the price!’ – ‘We have had enough of saving the Italians, the British. Honour, we don’t give a damn!’ – ‘And the Americans? Ever since the press has been talking about them, what are they doing, fooling them behind the lines and sleeping with our wives?’ 103 And at Pétain’s HQ his chief of staff thought that the British

97 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, II: 490.
100 ‘Notes on the Operations on Western Front after Sir D. Haig became Commander in Chief December 1915’, 30 January 1920, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 213a, p. 63.
101 Grant Diary I, 28 April 1918, WO 106/1456.
102 Spears diary, 16 April 1918, SPRS mss., acc. 1048, box 4.
should be given a shorter line ‘and left to stew in their own juice’. Other members of GQG staff passed frequent derogatory comments to Pershing’s American liaison officer, Major Paul Clark.

The French postal control records for mid April show criticism of the British who were ‘in too much of a hurry to retreat’, abandoning food and munitions and failing to destroy roads and bridges. The report on army morale for the first fortnight of May concludes as follows on relations with the allies:

the British Army is no longer accorded the (almost unlimited) confidence that it received before the battle. It is believed that French troops must support, reinforce and be present on both sides of the British. Above all, our troops are very glad to see that the supreme command of the two armies has now been given to a single commander, and to a French commander. It seems that, at the moment, for our troops that is the main reason for confidence.

Relations were no happier at the two army headquarters. The MMF report for 23 April stated that the British high command had ‘abdicated all direction’ and was blaming its government for imposing the extension of the British front. On 9 May the mission reported that GHQ regretted having given away its independence and felt ‘profoundly humiliated’, whilst acting with outward courtesy. Pétain was equally displeased. Pétain left his HQ and his staff and moved nearer to Foch, turning his role into that of a liaison officer, simply to make the point that any orders to the French Army should come through Pétain, and not be given directly by Foch. ‘Thank goodness we have got a central authority to fight the battle as a whole’, commented Clive.

The accumulated resentments came to a head over the rotation of British and French troops (roulement) which had the dual aim of putting British divisions in quiet sectors of the French front for rest and training, and releasing French divisions for use in a counter-attack. The roulement would cause the next crisis in Allied relations, when the Germans’ third attack came on 27 May on the Chemin des Dames.

104 Grant Diary I, 28 April 1918, WO 106/1456.
105 See the comments in reports #28, p. 4, 1 April; #32, p. 2, 4 April; #39, p. 13, 10 April; #49, p. 3, 20 April; #50, p. 7, 21 April; #54, p. 4, 25 April; #56, p. 5, 27 April 1918, Paul H. Clark papers, MMC 2992, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
106 See, for example, ‘Note sur la 62e Division d’Infanterie’, 14 April 1918, and ‘Note sur la 22e Division d’Infanterie’, 14 April 1918, GQG, SRA, 16N 1739, AG.
107 EMA (SRA), #169/SRA–CP, ‘Note sur le Moral des Troupes (d’après le Contrôle Postal) 1ère Quinzaine de Mai’, p. 4, 16N 1740, [d] 48.
108 Report #6381, 23 April 1918, and #7077, 9 May 1918, 17N 348, [d] 4 1918.
109 Clive diary 5 and 30 April, notebook 1 April 1918, CAB 45/201.
110 Clive diary, 18 April 1918, ibid.
Although Haig could see the value of *roulement* (Pétain could hardly be expected to continue sending French reserves northwards without some quid pro quo), Wilson was opposed. Foch had first suggested the scheme as early as 18 April, and Milner had approved the next day Haig’s dispatch of four divisions, provided that the arrangement was temporary and that no permanent ‘amalgame’ was envisaged.\(^{111}\) Wilson reacted strongly, claiming that the scheme would contravene Kitchener’s 1915 instructions to Haig. He presumed that Haig would refuse.\(^{112}\) Haig, however, ‘was not in favour of paying any attention’ to Wilson’s telegram and Grant was packed off to London where he received ‘a long lecture’ on the subject. It is hard to see any reason for Wilson’s opposition other than fear of a French take-over. Clive thought Wilson’s opposition uncharacteristic, and Grant thought it ‘very unreasonable’.\(^{113}\)

Despite agreement in principle that the British units should be placed in reserve of Sixth Army, and that the scheme should begin on 25 April with the transfer of 50 Division,\(^{114}\) when it came to the point Haig imposed a condition. Announcing that he was obliged to suppress nine divisions because of the lack of reinforcements to make good his casualties, Haig said that he would be unable to send any further British divisions to the French front unless each had been replaced beforehand by a fresh French division.\(^{115}\) It was at this point that Pétain sent in his letter of protest, already cited above, asking whether the British Empire was prepared to make the necessary sacrifices.

Foch’s response was simply to reiterate that *roulement* was necessary, to request the date when the three other divisions would be sent, and to state that it was necessary to extend the scheme to ten or more divisions. In the end the staff of IX Corps was sent to the Chemin des Dames along with four divisions. There, instead of holding a quiet portion of the front, they were unfortunate enough to be caught up in the fourth of the German offensives on 27 May. The overwhelming German superiority at the point of attack – the sensitive area of the Chemin des Dames where Nivelle’s 1917 offensive had failed to deliver a victory – led them as far as the River Marne, a river they had last seen in 1914. The offensive had surprised Foch and GQG, because its north–south orientation lacked strategic logic. Foch was criticised heavily for keeping French reserves in the

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\(^{111}\) Haig diary, 19 April 1918, WO 256/30.
\(^{112}\) WO telegram 56739, 19 April 1918, WO 158/28/71.
\(^{113}\) See both Grant diaries, 22 April 1918, WO 106/1456; Clive diary, 21 April 1918, CAB 45/201.
\(^{114}\) Sarcus meeting, 20 April 1918, WO 158/28/73, and *AFGG* 6/1, annex 1827.
\(^{115}\) Haig to Foch, OAD 825/1, 23 April 1918, WO 158/28/81 and *AFGG* 6/1, annex 1899. Copies in DuCane, *Foch*, 97–8, and in GQGA, 15N 10/23.
north, but he had judged correctly that the British were still the main enemy focus. It was the extent of the advance towards the Marne that made Ludendorff abandon his original intention to attack the British. Clemenceau had to defend his generals energetically in the Chamber.116

More bad feeling was generated when civilians saw the British units retiring, and there were many complaints about soldiers looting.117 The postal control records revealed a surge of anger against ‘our fine allies, who have cleared off, yet again’.118 The British survivors ‘who had fought so gloriously were hooted by French civilians when they were relieved and were going back to rest’. A German artillery officer met some civilians who ‘made the occasion a cue for cursing away at Britain and America’.119 Although the staff of one of the British divisions had no complaints and much appreciated what the French administration had done for them, the division as a whole was keen to get back to the British zone: ‘The question of British troops fighting with the French would never be an easy one, and however much both sides tried to make it easy it would always be difficult.’120

Yet the roulement plan was sound in principle. Foch was not trying to take over the BEF, despite the fears of Wilson who claimed that if ‘our present position and future relations with the French Army are not clearly defined now we shall lose the War by quarrelling with our Allies’.121 There were serious logistical problems involved in supplying troops of different nationalities on the same battlefield. After the Chemin des Dames offensive, however, the question of roulement lost its relevance because all the remaining German offensives were also undertaken against the French line, and the French had enough tired troops of their own to rotate into quieter sectors.

119 The French civilian attitude is described in Neville Lytton, The Press and the General Staff (London: Collins, 1920), 170; and Herbert Sulzbach, With the German Guns: Four Years on the Western Front 1914–1918 (London: Leo Cooper, 1973), 182.
120 Woodroffe diary, 13 June 1918 [after a visit to 19 Division].
121 Wilson’s memo on the mixing of French and British units, endorsed by the Army Council and annotated with Milner’s ‘entire agreement’, 15 May 1918, Lloyd George papers, F/38/3/32. See also DuCane, Foch, 21–2.
VI

The fourth German offensive also took place on the French front: the Battle of the Matz, 9–15 June. Action on the Chemin des Dames had died down by 3 June, but there were unmistakable signs of enemy activity in the Noyon–Montdidier–Compiègne area. (The Germans were obliged to move their artillery rapidly, at a time when the days were long and French aviation controlled the skies.) The events leading up to this offensive posed a serious threat to the command mechanism.

On 30 May, in anticipation of the attack, Foch had already warned Haig that he might have to move Tenth Army to support Pétain, and that Haig should be prepared in consequence to use some British general reserve divisions to make up for the French army’s departure. Then, on 3 June Foch asked for three British divisions to be placed astride the Somme, west of Amiens, so as to be ready to intervene in support of either the British or the French front.122

Whilst commanding Pétain to defend the road to Paris ‘foot by foot’, Foch took two further decisions to move support to the French front. First, on 2 June two divisions were taken from the DAN. Second, the five American divisions that had been training with the British were removed, with Pershing’s agreement, to the French front in Alsace where they were to free French divisions for the battle. In Haig’s view this was a ‘waste of valuable troops to send half-trained men to relieve French divisions. In three weeks’ time these Americans will be fit for battle. I doubt if the French divisions they relieve will ever really fight in this war.’123 While Haig had to accept that Pershing had the right to concur in Foch’s request, it seems ungenerous to complain about shattered French divisions being relieved – clearly he had forgotten the state of his own troops in March and April – although he admitted to Pershing that, given his recent experience, criticism of the French was hardly warranted.124

As Foch became more convinced that the Germans meant to press on in the French sector rather than move the assault to the British, he wrote again to Haig on 4 June. Because it was still not clear where the Germans would attack, he wrote, it was vital to commit all allied forces to what might be the decisive battle of the war. Accordingly Haig was asked to prepare the movement of all his reserves, and to diminish the density of

122 Foch to Haig, 30 May 1918, and 3 June 1918, AFGG 6/2, annexes 746, 1080; and WO 158/28/127, WO 158/29/129.
123 Haig diary, 3 June 1918, WO 256/32. For the state of the French units, see Pétain to Foch, 1 June and 4 June 1918, in AFGG 6/2, annexes 968, 1122.
troops on the frontline so as to constitute further reserves.\footnote{Foch to Haig, 4 June 1918, WO 158/29/134; also in AFGG 6/2, annex 1116.} This letter was followed by a telegram the same evening, urging rapid compliance because intelligence confirmed an imminent German attack in the Noyon–Montdidier area.

Foch’s two communications only reached Haig in the evening and crossed with Haig’s ‘formal protest’ to Foch: ‘I am taking steps at once to comply with your wishes, but . . . I beg to enter a formal protest against the removal of any portion of the British Army from my command until it is beyond doubt that most of the reserves available for the Crown Prince Rupprecht’s group of armies have been absorbed in the battle.’ Furthermore, Haig requested the return of his IX Corps that had been mauled on the Chemin des Dames.\footnote{OAD 861, 4 June 1918, WO 158/29/140. Haig makes no mention in his diary entry for 4 June of the ‘formal protest’.}

He sent to the War Cabinet copies of his correspondence with Foch. This was taken to be an appeal under the Beauvais agreement. Clive did not believe that Haig’s protest against troops leaving his zone was ‘meant as a protest to the Govt. under the terms of the Beauvais agreement’, but Lloyd George and the cabinet took it as such. This was because the exchange of views came hard on the heels of prolonged discussion in cabinet at the end of April about abandoning Dunkirk. Then the Chemin des Dames offensive caused grave anxiety in both Paris and London. DuCane told Hankey that the British would be hopelessly trapped if the French suffered a decisive defeat; Wilson told Hankey to persuade the prime minister to insist on Foch shortening his lines in the north by flooding and by abandoning Dunkirk; and so Hankey wrote in his diary: ‘I cannot exclude the possibility of a disaster.’\footnote{Hankey diary, 31 May, 3, 5 June 1918, HNKY 1/4, CCC. Long extracts from these diary entries are reproduced in his The Supreme Command 1914–1918, 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), II: 809–13.} It is not surprising, therefore, that the cabinet should take the correspondence sent by Haig as an appeal under the agreement – and, no doubt, Haig was content that they should do so. Indeed, his postwar ‘Notes on Operations’ states that he ‘appealed to the British Government’.\footnote{‘Notes on the Operations on Western Front after Sir D. Haig became Commander in Chief December 1915’, 30 January 1920, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 213a, p. 66.}

The inner cabinet, or X committee, which had been established to deal with strategy, convened twice on 5 June to discuss Haig’s predicament.\footnote{Notes of a Conversation, X 7, X 8, 5 June 1918, CAB 23/17.} As usual, Wilson urged that Foch should be made to shorten the line in the north by seawater flooding. He argued that Foch’s methods would
lose the war: ‘He spends his time racing about . . . he can’t use his Staff, & he thinks only of blocking holes’. 130 Milner agreed that Foch had acted wisely in putting the three British divisions astride the Somme, but argued that using the British troops in this way gave London a lever with which to pressure Foch into shortening the line in the north. Lloyd George insisted that Milner and Wilson go over to France to settle the issue and he also undertook, more significantly, to contact the Admiralty to see how many British troops could be evacuated from France should disaster occur. Obviously confidence in Foch’s ability to hold, let alone defeat, the Germans was waning.

The following day, the conviction had grown that Foch had to grant some ‘concession’ in return for Haig’s supplying three British divisions to act as reserves behind Amiens. Such a concession might allow Haig discretion to pull back his line when he saw fit, rather than waiting for Foch’s (unlikely) orders. 131 Such discussion reveals that British politicians were thinking of ways to circumvent the tactical dispositions of the French general of whose appointment Lloyd George boasted and whom Milner had urged should be supported because it was better to support one man than to indulge in warfare by committee. Dillon’s impression – ‘Now that the British Government has a master in Foch, I’m not at all sure that it likes it’ – would appear to be correct. 132

In order to settle the issue, Milner and the CIGS left for Paris on 6 June. On arrival at GHQ, Wilson talked with Lawrence, who claimed that Foch was heading straight for disaster, and with Haig, who said that the French were not fighting. Milner spoke with Plumer, GOC II Army in Flanders. Plumer said that he could hold the line even with a reduced DAN, and that it was inadvisable to withdraw voluntarily from his present, very strong position. He gave Milner to understand that he was ‘very decidedly opposed to any withdrawal at the present time’. 133 Plumer’s positive attitude contrasted with the deep pessimism that Haig and, more especially, Lawrence evinced at GHQ. Lawrence went so far as to opine that, if the agreed policy of maintaining contact with the French was to be followed, then the BEF needed to withdraw to positions south of the Somme within the next twenty-four hours.

In order to know precisely where he stood in the meeting with Foch and Clemenceau, Milner asked Haig to prepare a clear statement of what he

130 Wilson diary, 5 June 1918.
131 Notes of a Conversation, X 9, 6 June 1918, CAB 23/17.
132 Dillon diary, 5 June 1918, in Brigadier the Viscount Dillon, Memories of Three Wars (London: Allan Wingate, 1951), 117. Dillon was in England between 27 May and 5 June.
could give without ‘recklessly endangering’ the BEF.\textsuperscript{134} Haig read out his memorandum, stating that he would meet Foch’s wishes, as he always had in the past, by doing everything in his power to assist the Generalissimo, short of imperilling his army. Foch’s response was that he had not taken any of Haig’s reserves, but had merely asked that plans be prepared for their deployment should that become necessary. He would not move troops ‘imprudently’, but he must be allowed to issue commands as he had been authorised to do.

Milner already knew from DuCane before the meeting began that Foch had not in fact removed any of Haig’s troops and that Haig seemed to be under a misapprehension:

Foch . . . by no means, desired to draw away Haig’s reserves at this moment nor until the development of the German attack was better defined. All that he had asked Haig to do was to make preparations for sending them to the south in case it became evident that the whole strength of the German attack was to be directed against the French, under which circumstances Haig would be able to spare them.\textsuperscript{135}

What is more, DuCane had explained to Haig that Foch had ‘no intention of acting so imprudently as to withdraw’ British reserves until the situation was clearer.

As Milner realised, it was a storm in a teacup: ‘there was, in fact, a misunderstanding and that, so far at any rate, Foch had not asked for anything which Haig was materially opposed to’. It emerged that Haig’s complaint was, rather, that Foch had removed French divisions and their artillery from the DAN without informing Haig under whose command they were. Clemenceau jumped on Foch at this, and said that such a proceeding must never happen again.\textsuperscript{136} Milner described Clemenceau as being ‘most emphatic’ on the point, but he (Milner) thought that the error had been a ‘staff muddle’ and not an intentional slight. Certainly Foch’s letters to Haig reveal a scrupulous care to be polite and follow due procedures, even when insisting on his wishes being executed. Having cleared up the misunderstanding, agreement was reiterated that contact between French and British was the supreme aim, with retention of the Channel ports coming second, although still a vital consideration.

Whether Haig’s complaint was over movement of his reserves or over the composition of the DAN, the cause of the fuss was Haig’s exploration of the boundaries of the unified command. DuCane believed that Haig

\textsuperscript{134} ‘Note’, 7 June 1918, WO 158/72/33. The conference proceedings are in ibid., 34, \textit{AFGG} 6/2, annex 1257, and 15N 10/111.

\textsuperscript{135} Milner, ‘Record of a Visit to Paris’.

\textsuperscript{136} Wilson diary, 7 June 1918.
was really testing the government’s commitment. Haig wrote in his diary:

The effect of the Beauvais conference is now becoming clearer in practice. The effect I had realised from the beginning, namely that the responsibility for the safety of the British Army in France could no longer rest with me, because the ‘Generalissimo’ can do what he thinks right with my troops. On the other hand, the British Government is only now beginning to understand what Foch’s powers as Generalissimo amount to. This delegation of power to Foch was inevitable, but I intend to ask that the British Government should in a document modify my responsibility for the safety of the British Army under the altered conditions.

Haig’s request to have new instructions from the Secretary of State was not granted until 21 June, and then matters were left pretty much where they had stood in Lord Kitchener’s instructions at the end of 1915. The aims as stated then were unchanged. The only changes were the right of appeal (the necessity for which, it was hoped, ‘may seldom, if ever, arise’) if the commander-in-chief believed Foch’s orders imperilled the BEF; roulement with French troops was a temporary expedient; and Haig was to assist US troops in training and equipment when so requested by Foch.

This meeting of French and British politicians and military on 7 June is highly significant. If Haig had indeed been testing the water, he had received a very definite response, showing that the politicians were in control. Both Milner and Clemenceau acted skilfully. Milner supported Foch’s right to issue orders and Clemenceau criticised Foch for taking away divisions from the DAN without informing Haig. DuCane told Clive that Clemenceau ‘criticised it severely’. Weygand subsequently apologised for the muddle. It was generally agreed that Clemenceau had handled the conference with both skill and tact.

As a result, the meeting was adjudged a success. Both Milner and Wilson felt that their journey had been worth the trouble; and DuCane noted the ‘conciliatory’ attitudes of Milner and Clemenceau whilst a ‘good deal of steam was let off’ by Haig and Foch. Clemenceau suggested that Haig and Foch should meet face to face more often, a view with which Milner concurred. As DuCane noted, this was not very flattering to him personally.

137 DuCane, Foch, 40, 42. 138 Haig diary, 7 June 1918, WO 256/32.
139 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, III: 169–70. Text of the revised instructions: ibid, appendix IX. For Kitchener’s instructions to Haig, see ch. 3, p. 44.
140 Clive notebooks, 8 June 1918, CAB 45/201. Clemenceau, Clive wrote, ‘gave Foch a great scolding’.
141 Milner, ‘Record of a Visit to Paris’.
as liaison officer – it was his role to prevent such misunderstandings – but he found out that a go-between could never replace a meeting between principals, when ‘difficulties disappeared like magic’.  

Despite Haig’s comment, cited above, about the government only now beginning to realise what they had done at Beauvais, he seems to have been satisfied by the meeting. He told Derby that his difficulty with Foch ‘had been satisfactorily arranged’. The MMF’s report of 10 June stated that Haig agreed with Foch on the necessity to hold on to both the Channel ports and the road to Paris, and on the necessity for local operations on the British front to maintain the ‘offensive spirit’. Both Haig and the general staff carried out Foch’s orders, despite their worries about seeing their resources move southwards, with a ‘perfect sense of discipline’ and as speedily as possible.

The conference did not settle the question of whether Haig should have to obey Foch’s orders if his objections to them were rejected. ‘It was tacitly admitted’, Milner wrote, ‘that, given such due notice and a chance of having his views fully considered, he would have to obey Foch as Commander-in-Chief if the latter insisted on over-ruuling his objections’. A further problem, neither discussed nor admitted, tacitly or otherwise, was whether Haig should obey Foch’s orders and then appeal to London if he thought they imperilled his army, or whether he should appeal first before obeying.

For the time being, however, relations were smoothed. Although during the Battle of the Matz the Germans captured yet more ground, the French defences were elastic and constructed in depth, and the French line gave way in good order. The offensive was halted on 12 June, although minor attacks continued until the 15th. This, the fourth of the German offensives on the Western Front, was nothing like its three predecessors. The French even made a successful counter-attack, led by General Mangin and using tanks.

VII

By July the command mechanism was looking very different from the way it had appeared in March. Pétain was still unhappy that Foch seemed to be favouring the British. When instructed to return the British XXII

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142 DuCane, Foch, 42.
143 Derby diary, 7 June 1918, in David Dutton (ed.), Paris 1918: The War Diary of the British Ambassador, the 17th Earl of Derby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 37.
144 MMF report #8212, 10 June 1918, 17N 348, [d] 4; copy in GQGA papers, 15N 10, t. 2.
145 Milner, ‘Record of a Visit to Paris’. 
Corps to Haig and to reinforce the DAN with more artillery, Pétain invoked his right of appeal to the premier. He complained that French resources were barely sufficient and that he could spare neither men nor guns. Political control was imposed even more firmly. The French commander’s right of appeal was revoked on 26 June, and his chief of staff (General Anthoine, who was considered to be too pessimistic) was replaced by General Edmond Buat. Henceforth Pétain would have to obey Foch’s orders without question. This gave clarity that was lacking in the Foch–Haig relationship.

In London France’s ability to hold on until victory was now seriously being questioned. Quarrels over manpower envenomed very real fears that the French might be defeated. The two German offensives against the French lines had caused near panic in Paris and talk of the government leaving the capital, just as had happened in 1914. If the capital fell, the head of military intelligence at the War Office believed, then France might make a separate peace. Milner had written to the Prime Minister just after his trip to France to adjudicate between Foch and Haig: ‘We must be prepared for France & Italy both being beaten to their knees.’ This pessimism brought to the fore arguments for reducing Britain’s Western Front contribution, falling back on command of the sea, and concentrating on gaining mastery in Asia and the Middle East.

As fears that France might be defeated grew, so did resentment of what London saw as French pretensions to power and influence. Hankey considered that as French ‘material resources decrease, their ambitions doubly increase’. Wilson wrote in his diary of Clemenceau ‘grabbing’ as much power as he could. This resentment and pessimism explain what was seen as an attempt to clip Foch’s wings, right at the end of the final meeting of the July session of the SWC. Lloyd George supplied a resolution, in English, defining the role of the PMRs vis-à-vis the

146 On the circumstances of this episode see Colonel Herbillon, Souvenirs d’un officier de liaison, 2 vols. (Paris: Tallandier, 1930), II: 277, 283; Pedroncini, Pétain, 383–7; Weygand, Idéal vécu, 548–9, 553.

147 Clive diary, 1 June 1918, CAB 45/201.

148 Milner to Lloyd George, 9 June 1918, F/38/3/37.

149 Shorthand notes of the Fifteenth Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 11 June 1918, p. 7, CAB 23/43; Amery to PM, 8 June and 19 June 1918, Lloyd George papers, F/2/1/24 and 25.


Generalissimo. They were charged with the planning for the autumn and 1919 campaigns and, according to Weygand, given the right to consult army commanders independently of Foch.\textsuperscript{152} This resolution was passed by Clemenceau (whose English was good) and the rest of the Council.\textsuperscript{153}

When Foch saw the French translation of the resolution he immediately insisted on the wording being changed and obliged Clemenceau to return to Versailles from Paris in order to secure this. A bitter row ensued and Foch threatened to resign. Lloyd George said there was far too much of generals making such threats. If a soldier so threatened he would be put up against a wall. Clemenceau joined in, claiming that Foch’s intransigence made him ‘mad’, and when he was ‘mad’ he always wanted to kill someone, preferably a general.\textsuperscript{154}

The upshot was that Foch’s objections were upheld – an index of the importance of his threat to resign – despite the resolution having been already adopted. A ‘horrible hybrid draft’ of an amendment was agreed that offended Hankey’s tidy, administrative soul but satisfied Foch. The final version charged the PMRs with planning future campaigns ‘in consultation’ with Foch, but in distinction to any personal plans that Foch might be preparing. Foch expected ‘to be consulted’ before any important decision was taken in other theatres that might have an impact on the area for which he had the responsibility.\textsuperscript{155}

Lloyd George’s attempt (with Clemenceau’s assent) to give the SWC more power at Foch’s expense failed, because the Western Front still required a military leader capable of inspiring the weary armies to continue the fight. If Foch threatened to resign over the matter, then murderous comments by both prime ministers were unavailing. Although Wilson thought the amendment to the resolution was ‘not of substance’ and Foch rather ‘childish’ over the matter, the change was enough to satisfy Foch who complained that the British government ‘always raises difficulties, mixes political polemic in with the most serious decisions – you have to be vigorous in standing up to them’. In his Mémoires Foch stated unequivocally that the politicians had been worried by his


\textsuperscript{153} Weygand (\textit{Idéal vécu}, 550–2) may be right when he claimed sleight of hand. He told T. Daniel Shumate on 17 April 1951 that Clemenceau ‘would probably not have accepted the resolution had it not been introduced at the end of the meeting when participants were fatigued’: Shumate, ‘Allied Supreme War Council’, 863, n. 43.

\textsuperscript{154} Hankey diary, 4 July 1918, in \textit{Supreme Command}, II: 822–3; Wilson diary, 4 July 1918.

\textsuperscript{155} DuCane to CIGS, 5 July 1918, WO 106/417.
extensive powers, had tried to reinstate the PMRs’ right of control, if not
initiative, over planning, but had finally agreed that the PMRs should
consult him before submitting their plans to the full council.  

Foch’s anger at the threat of a diminution of his powers probably derived
from frustration and apprehension that his desire to begin the counter-
offensive might be thwarted. He had good reason for an optimism that few
shared. Although it had been a close-run thing, the Germans had now been
defeated in four successive offensives. Moreover, the British had not been
attacked since April and had had time to restore their effectiveness. The
communications infrastructure was greatly improved, particularly the rail
crossings over the Somme. Ample munitions supplies and the arrival of
US troops had enabled successful raids to be carried out which showed the
Germans to be weakening, and optimism grew accordingly.

Foch had another reason for confidence. The French intelligence
service was now working extremely well. Its head, Colonel Cointet of
the 2nd Bureau at GQG, was so sure of his analysis of the date and
location of the next German attack that he went on leave for four days
on 30 June. With daily statements of how many German divisions were
in the front line or in reserve, how many were fresh or were tired, and how
many reserve divisions had not had their positions pinpointed, Foch
could feel confident that he could parry the next German offensive and
then pass on to the counter-offensive.

Haig discussed offensive operations with Foch on 28 June. They also
arranged to relieve the DAN, because the French front was now short of
reserves since suffering the May and June offensives. The British front was
strengthened by the US divisions in training there, and by the return of the
British corps from the Aisne. These measures restored greater national unity
to the front. Haig was satisfied with the meeting: ‘I think he means to play
the game by me & to be a good “comrade”’, he wrote to his wife. The
references to Foch in the diary entries for the remainder of June following
the clearing of the air with Milner and Wilson are positive. Foch had been

156 Wilson diary, 4 July 1918; Mme Foch diary, 5 July 1918, Foch papers, 414/AP/13;
Foch, Mémoires, 144–5.

157 See Ian M. Brown, ‘Feeding Victory: The Logistic Imperative Behind the Hundred
Days’, in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds.), 1918: Defining Victory (Canberra: Army
History Unit, Department of Defence, 1999), 139–40; A. M. Henniker, Transportation

158 ‘Extraits des Souvenirs Inédits du Général L. de Cointet: Le Service des
Bureau du GQG, GQGA, 15N 5.

159 Haig diary, 28 June 1918, WO 256/32; Haig to Lady Haig, 29 June 1918, Haig mss.,
acc. 3153, no. 151; DuCane, Foch, 43.
applying the pressure in London to fill up the BEF’s divisions; and Haig had been reassured that the ‘subordination’ of the British Army to a French generalissimo was ‘only a temporary arrangement’. So Haig-Foch relations were better at this stage than Foch-Pétain relations. Pétain told Clive that ‘the French Army “can’t stand the sight of Foch” . . . He has never once asked his opinion. He could not work under F. in any capacity.’

Foch had put all necessary defensive measures in place for the next German attack which was expected in mid July, although the exact place of the attack, whether against the Franco-British junction again or towards Paris, was unknown. Both Haig and Pétain arranged for reserves to be made immediately available in case of attack, with transport arrangements made to move British reserves south to support the French and vice versa. All this was summed up in the Directive Générale no. 4 of 1 July. Paris and Abbeville were the two danger points, the latter because an attack there might separate French and British, and the former because of the effect on morale. Ten days later Foch had changed his views about the place. His intelligence indicated that the German offensive would come in the Champagne. As his conviction grew that such an attack would be the main, and not a diversionary, attack, his actions led to another British attempt to modify the command relationship.

On 12 July Foch asked Haig to move two British divisions to support the Franco-British boundary, weakened because of moving French divisions eastwards to meet the expected attack. The next day, 13 July, Foch requested four British divisions for the French front, with preparations to be made for the possible transport of a further four, should the battle require it. Pétain was asked to maintain the proposed Mangin counter-offensive between Aisne and Marne, because it would constitute a highly efficacious defensive measure. Foch was confident that his intelligence was accurate (he was using the new French division aérienne to observe the enemy’s preparations). The German attack – Ludendorff’s last – began, as anticipated, on 15 July.

Foch’s second request for British troops alarmed the cabinet. GHQ did not believe that the Champagne attack was the main effort (they were right, as far as Ludendorff’s intentions went, but wrong in practice). Lloyd George, who was (in Hankey’s words) ‘very rampageous still about getting more Americans’, convened the dominions prime

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160 Brigadier C. J. C. Grant, ‘Recollections of Marshal Foch in 1918’, Army Quarterly 18 (July 1929), 331; Haig diary, 17 June 1918, WO 256/32.
161 Clive notebooks, 2 July 1918, CAB 45/201.
162 Details in Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, III: 191.
ministers, Borden and Smuts, and Milner and Wilson at Lord Riddell’s house in Sussex, where he was staying. At the private discussion late on 14 July, Lloyd George was, as Hankey put it:

very strong (almost violent) about the withdrawal of divisions. He evidently suspected Clemenceau of using unfair political influence on Foch to save the French Army and Paris at all costs. He was willing to trust Foch, but regarded Clemenceau’s personality and his daily visits to Foch as a great danger, tending to bias the Allied Commander-in-Chief unduly ... Eventually it was decided to send a telegram to Haig reminding him of the Beauvais agreement which authorized him to appeal against Foch if he thought the safety of the British Army endangered; it was also decided to send Smuts over.

Hankey duly drafted a telegram that was dispatched just after midnight. When the full Imperial War Cabinet of prime ministers met the next day Lloyd George explained that he had written to Haig about the Imperial Cabinet’s collective ‘considerable anxiety’ about a possible attack on the British front. It was generally admitted that it would be a ‘very difficult decision’ for the cabinet ‘to oppose or over-ride the General-in-Chief on a military question’. Before the appointment of a single commander-in-chief, the presumption had been that in any conflict between French and British commanders each government would support its own general. Now, however, the presumption must be that the Allied General-in-Chief was right. The fact that the German attack had begun that morning on the wide front that Foch had predicted lent weight to this presumption. Smuts then withdrew in order to travel to France to ascertain Haig’s attitude to the move of British reserves.

The British prime minister’s behaviour in inciting Haig to appeal against what events proved to have been a correct decision by the allied commander-in-chief whom Lloyd George had worked to appoint represents a very low point in the Franco-British relationship. He had just composed a severe letter to Clemenceau which warned that any overwhelming of the British such as had occurred on 21 March would be attributed by popular opinion to Foch’s partiality in favouring the French over the British sector and might ‘prove fatal to the continuance’ of unity of command. Lloyd George reminded the French premier that he had ‘placed the life of the Government in considerable jeopardy’ by subordinating the British Army to a French general.


164 Minutes, Imperial War Cabinet 24A, 15 July 1918, CAB 23/44A.

165 Holograph letter, Lloyd George to Clemenceau, 13 July 1918, Fonds Clemenceau, 6N 166, [d] 2 Effectifs Anglais, AG. Ts. copy in Lloyd George papers, F/50/3/7.
authorised by the full cabinet to write to Clemenceau, ‘pointing out that
General Foch was an Allied and not merely a French Commander-in-
Chief, and that he must treat the Allied interests as a whole, making his
dispositions on this basis and not mainly from the point of view of French
interests’. Clive had to spend an hour with Lloyd George on the 15th,
‘walking up and down the garden, calming his suspicions of
Clemenceau’.167

Haig did not believe in the Champagne attack, although he moved the
divisions Foch had requested. He wrote to his wife: ‘Foch seems to be
in a “funk”, and has ordered British troops away to the French area again
for no good reason. I am therefore starting early tomorrow to meet him &
lobby a protest.’169

Thus Haig had complied in part with Foch’s request, although doubting
the validity of Foch’s reasoning, before he received the message from
London about the War Cabinet’s anxiety. Haig perceived immediately
the political implications. The message spoke of Foch’s ‘orders’ and of
Haig using his ‘judgment’ under the Beauvais agreement about the
security of his front. Haig noted the disparity between his instructions
from Milner at the conference on 7 June in Paris, when he was told to
obey first and protest later, and his updated official instructions of 21 June
that wrote of appealing against Foch’s orders before executing them. As
Haig noted perceptively: ‘This is a case of “heads you win and tails I
lose”! If things go well, the Government takes the credit to themselves
and the Generalissimo; if badly, the Field-Marshal will be blamed!’170

Scorning his political masters, but not convinced by Foch’s reasoning,
Haig set off to see Foch on the morning of 15 July, by which time the
German assault had begun to the east and to the west of Reims on a 55-
mile front. By the time he reached Foch’s headquarters, the latter was
‘in the best of spirits’. East of Reims the attack was held, and west of
Reims the Americans held Château-Thierry strongly and would probably
stop the German advance on the Marne. Foch was greatly relieved that
the Germans had not attacked further east, at Verdun, say, where he had
no reserves at all. This gives an indication of how the French reserves had
been skewed by the March and April offensives, and how much confi-
dence Foch had placed in his intelligence reports. As a consequence the
British troops were ordered to detrain further west. Haig argued his case

166 Draft minutes, War Cabinet 444A, 11 July 1918, CAB 23/14.
167 Clive diary, 15 July 1918, CAB 45/201.
168 Edmonds, France and Belgium 1918, III: 225.
169 Haig to Lady Haig, 14 July 1918, Haig mss., acc. 3155, no. 151.
170 Haig diary, 15 July 1918, WO 256/33.
that he expected an attack on the British front and could not spare any
more divisions; but Foch would not annul his request, arguing that his
first aim was to hold up the present attack, not later potential ones, and
that the divisions were only a reserve and might be returned immediately
if that became necessary. So Haig agreed to dispatch the two extra
divisions. They would take part in the successful counter-attack of
18 July that marked the beginning of the end of the war.

By the time that Smuts arrived (about 8 p.m.) to find out what was
happening, Lloyd George’s fears had been overtaken by events. Smuts
was informed that Haig considered the situation to be ‘satisfactory’.
However, he still expected to be attacked soon, probably around
Kemmel. Smuts told the cabinet on his return that the ‘Field Marshal
had formed the impression ... that Foch had almost lost his head’.
Nonetheless, Foch had satisfied Haig that the British divisions could be
returned quickly if necessary, and consequently that the British Army was
not imperilled. Seven out of the nine German divisions that had moved
away from Crown Prince Rupprecht’s reserves had been identified on the
Reims front. Haig had disparaged the French efforts by claiming that the
presence of American troops had boosted their morale considerably. This
lack of generosity was seen for what it was by the cabinet who ‘generally
agreed’ that Haig’s doubts ‘might be discounted, as all through the war
there had been a tendency on the part of both the British and the French
Armies to belittle the fighting value of the other’. 171

In sum, the defensive battle had been won. Although much ill will had
been generated over the movement of reserves, both British and French,
Foch’s decisions had been proved to be correct. The freeing of fresh
divisions for the counter-attack by replacing them in the line by tired
troops from other sectors had also been carried out successfully, as the
forthcoming action would show. Foch had risked a good deal by main-
taining secrecy about his plans, especially as the Chemin des Dames had
provoked much criticism of both Foch and Clemenceau. Now his ability
to plan and mount a counter-attack was about to be demonstrated.

171 Minutes, Imperial War Cabinet 24B, 16 July 1918, CAB 23/44A.