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The Admiralty War Staff, 1912–1918: An Analysis of the Personnel

THE OFFICERS of the Admiralty War Staff (Naval Staff from May 1917) have received a bad press, despite some praise for their work at the end of the war.¹ In particular, the Naval Staff has been the victim of an unholy trinity of service critics.² Kenworthy quoted, and approved, of the following view of those who served at the Admiralty (including those on the Staff): ‘The Admiralty breeds mediocre men and the mediocre man surrounds himself with mediocre men. Like calls to like with penguin gravity.’³ Dewar wrote, in what was the theme of his memoirs, that, ‘our system of training had not produced the right type of man and that we lacked the intellectual capital to float an efficient staff.’⁴ For Richmond, the Admiralty was full of ‘cabbage-headed people’ and ‘nonentities’, among whom he included Jellicoe.⁵ Most secondary sources take a similar view.⁶ Of two books directly on the Admiralty itself, one commented, ‘Most of the Staff Officers had been selected as too sick or incompetent to be sent to sea.’⁷ Generally Richmond, the Dewars and their friends had very little positive to say about their time at the Admiralty.⁸ The following could be said to be a fair summation of the view found in most secondary works: ‘The Staff was . . . merely a nondescript collection of officers. Many of them were retired officers who had been recalled in the war and who

¹ Marder, *DNSF*, vol. iv, pp. 213–230 & vol. v, pp. 3–11, 314–319; Grieves, K., *Sir Eric Geddes. Business and Government in War and Peace*, Manchester 1989, pp. 40–48; Rodger, *Admiralty*, pp. 133–136.

² Dewar, *Navy from Within*; Kenworthy, *Sailors*; Marder, *Portrait*; Hunt, *Sailor Scholar*.

³ Anonymous letter, 22 February 1917, cited in Kenworthy, *Sailors*, p. 63.

⁴ Dewar, *Navy from Within*, p. 229.

⁵ Marder, *Portrait*, 10 May 1917, p. 252.

⁶ D’Ombrain, N., *War Machinery and High Policy*, Oxford 1973, p. 163; Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 208–209.

⁷ Rodger, *Admiralty*, p. 128.

⁸ Dewar, A. C., ‘Winston Churchill at the Admiralty’, *Naval Review* XI, 1921, pp. 501–525.

were as ignorant of the principles of staff work as they were of strategy and operations.⁹ There is, however, a difficulty when using Richmond's opinions at face value. He was a man with a fertile mind and considerable ability. He was also strong-minded and convinced of his own rightness. Few doubts come across in his work. Given the regularity with which he was cited by Professor Marder, in particular, he might easily be seen as a wholly reliable source. There is, however, a danger that too many of Richmond's views have been accepted in their entirety. He appears rarely to have had a good word to say for anybody, and criticised, for example, Rear-Admiral Alexander Duff (DASD) for lacking the 'hideous rudeness' to get anything tangible done at the Admiralty, but rarely in any system does 'hideous rudeness' get a person anywhere.¹⁰ It certainly would not help create an efficiently working bureaucratic machine. In addition he was critical that the Admiralty failed to consider areas outside the North Sea where the action of sea power might have had an actual effect on the outcome of the war. He was, for instance, particularly keen on the possibility of naval operations off the coast of the Near East.¹¹ But as an experienced Plans Division officer noted, 'mere feints would in no way affect the German Command, and would therefore be of little or no value'.¹² Both the DPD and DID agreed.¹³ Neither of these were men of little ability. The problem is that Richmond has been very influential on later historians, particularly Professor Marder who edited his diaries, and the result has been to allow Richmond too much influence in evaluating the views of those who worked on the Naval Staff in London. Other chapters in this book will look at the Staff's opinions of various operations and strategic questions. This chapter gives some assessment as to the personal qualities, qualifications and experience of those who made up the War Staff, and the paths that led them to Whitehall. The evidence does not support a number of the allegations made about the Staff.

Between its creation in January 1912 and the end of the First World War some 930 individuals served on the Admiralty War and Naval Staff; 792 are listed in the quarterly returns of the *Navy List*.¹⁴ This latter figure is misleading.

⁹ Marder, *DNSF*, vol. v, pp. 314–315.

¹⁰ Marder, *Portrait*, 4 May 1917, p. 247.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9 February 1915, p. 140.

¹² Halliday Memorandum, 'The Syrian Coast', 11 November 1917. ADM 137/2706.

¹³ Fuller Minute, 30 January 1918; Hall Minute, 11 February 1918. ADM 137/1417. Both in reply to Fremantle (Rear Admiral Commanding Aegean Squadron) Memorandum, 'Desirability of effecting raids on the coast of Anatolia during forthcoming spring and summer', 30 December 1917. ADM 137/1417.

¹⁴ *Navy List*, April, July, October 1912; January, April, July, October 1913; January, April, July, October 1914; January, April, July, October 1915; January, April, July, October 1916; January, April, July, October 1917; January, April, July, October 1918. Each *Navy*

It ignored the names of many officers who served on the Staff (sometimes but briefly), such as the engraver Eric Gill or Captain Henry Thursfield.¹⁵ More importantly, the *Navy List* suggested a Staff structure which was not an accurate reflection of how the Staff worked. This is only revealed by looking at other documents, in particular the Admiralty's own wartime Telephone Directories (see Appendix B).¹⁶ Thus, trying to compile an authoritative list of Staff Officers is far from easy, as the various sources for membership are often somewhat contradictory, and one is almost left asking 'Will the real Admiralty War Staff please step forward?' For example, the *Navy List* contains two lists for the War Staff. One is found under the 'Board of Admiralty' section, with divisional headings under which Staff Officers' names appear. This list, however, is often at odds with the names listed elsewhere in the same publication for staff appointed to HMS *President*. This was the ship to which all those who had Admiralty postings were nominally attached. This too has some (but not all) divisional listings that usually contain a shorter list of officers.¹⁷ There is, however, a further list (or lists) of officers appointed to 'miscellaneous' postings. Most, but not all, officers can be found here, but they are mixed up with other officers who had nothing to do with the War Staff, and who worked elsewhere in the Admiralty structure. Added to this, neither of these two possible lists always ties in with names listed as War Staff Officers in the contemporary Admiralty Telephone Directories. But then these directories have gaps in the sequence, do not contain dates of appointments, and rarely fit chronologically with the issue dates of the *Navy List*, and so direct comparison is far from easy. Some officers came and went quite quickly, and so could be picked up in one and missed by the other. Finally there are the Admiralty *Indexes* and *Digests*. These are the Admiralty's own contemporary catalogues used by clerks to make their way round the department's archives and registries. The *Indexes* list Admiralty documents by the recipient's name.¹⁸ The *Digests*, however, organised subjects not by name but by topic.¹⁹ War Staff business is found under Section 5 part IV. But neither the *Index* nor the *Digest*

List was correct to one of the following four dates each year: March 18, June 18, September 18 and December 18. ADM 177.

¹⁵ Gill to DASD, August 1918. ADM 137/2715.

¹⁶ Admiralty Telephone Directory, March 1914; December 1914; April 1915; July 1915; February 1916; February 1917; May 1917; February 1918; May 1918; August 1918. Admiralty Library.

¹⁷ Not all divisions appear here. For example the 1917–1918 *Navy Lists* make no mention of the Mercantile Movements Division under the HMS *President* list.

¹⁸ By 1916 two ledgers were used for each letter of the alphabet, e.g. ADM 12/1558a and ADM 12/1558b cover the letter 'S' for 1916.

¹⁹ Admiralty Digests: 1914, ADM 12/1525; 1915, ADM 12/1539a & ADM 12/1539b; 1916,

The British Naval Staff in the First World War

Figure 1.1: All Named Individuals on the Admiralty War Staff, August 1914–November 1918

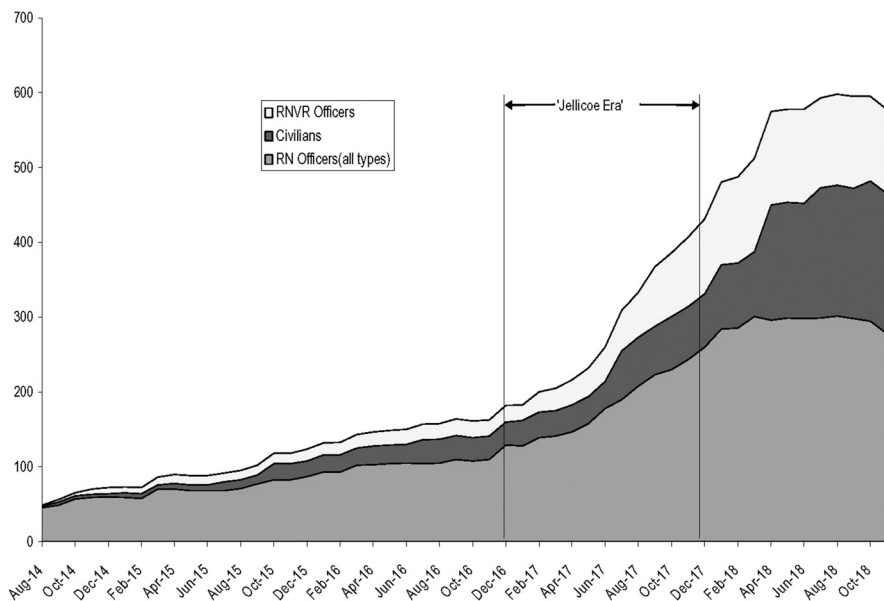
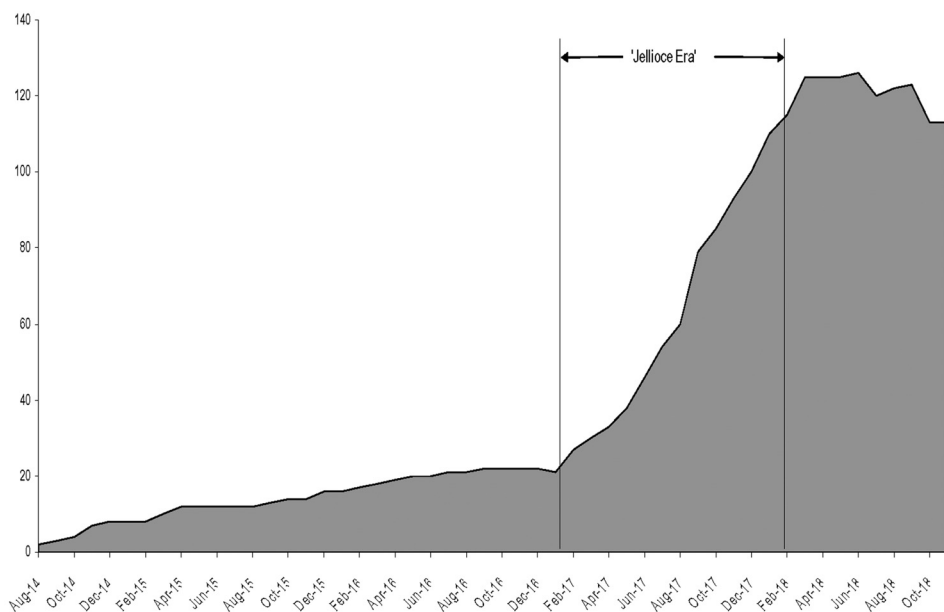
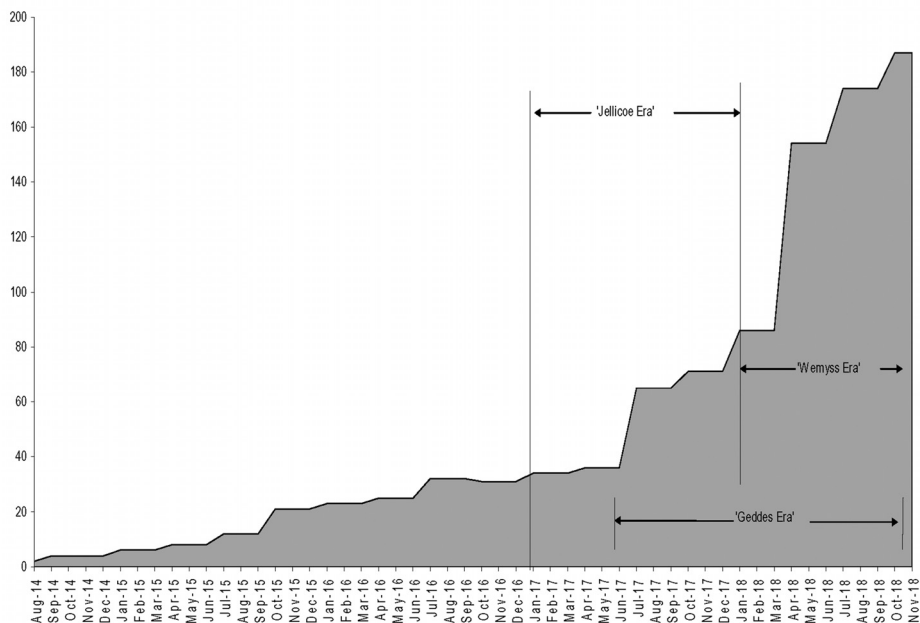


Figure 1.2: Admiralty War Staff employment of RNVR Officers, 1914–1918



The Admiralty War Staff, 1912–1918

Figure 1.3: Named Civilians on the Admiralty War Staff, 1914–1918



necessarily coincides with any of the other lists, and appointments, which are known to have been made from other sources, do not always appear to be mentioned in these records.²⁰ The total of 930 is therefore the result of conflating all these sources, and then checking them against service records.

These records differ by category of officer being studied, but those of executive officers, for example, record the dates of appointments, promotions and abbreviated reports on conduct as well as bouts of illness and injury, although even here the dates of appointments to the War Staff do not always tally with those mentioned elsewhere.²¹ All of this creates a problem in that the 930 names almost certainly constitute an underestimate of the true numbers, but with so many conflicting or incomplete sources it may not ever be possible to reconstruct a full list.

When analysing the War Staff, these 930 people can be described as falling

ADM 12/1561a & ADM 12/1561b; 1917, ADM 12/1582a & ADM 12/1582b; 1918, ADM 12/1603a & ADM 12/1603b.

²⁰ Admiralty War Personnel Index, 1921. Admiralty Library; Life Histories of ID 25, n.d. [c. 1919], ADM 223/769.

²¹ Some of these reports can be found at greater length in the file of confidential reports kept in ADM 196/90.

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