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# Reckoning with Responsibility: The Mesopotamia Commission into British Military Failings during a Moment of Imperial Transformation, 1916–19

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## Abstract

In August 1916, in the aftermath of significant defeats in the Middle Eastern theatre of the First World War, the British government faced a crisis of confidence in its military power. In Mesopotamia, it was under significant pressure to reckon with its perceived poor strategic decision-making and its treatment and resourcing of British troops. The Mesopotamia Commission was established to investigate and reassure the wider public that the same mistakes would not be made again. Scholarly explorations of the commission have focused on the commission's report published in July 1917. But this neglects what came before: the construction, performance, and repercussions of the commission as it unfolded. This article undertakes a forensic archival analysis of the commission 'in process', revealing the political character of the commission—how it presented itself, the commissioner's decision-making, and the intra-imperial conflicts it aggravated during the war itself—all while operating under (and benefitting from) an expert, impartial guise. This granular approach to inquiry analysis not only contributes to new understandings of British imperial politics during the First World War but also demonstrates that, as a selective process of knowledge production, the commission's outcomes and impact went well beyond just a published report.

## Introduction

In August 1916, the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) published an article titled 'A Voice from the Dead'. The article described a letter sent to the BMJ by Sir Victor Horsley, a British soldier–surgeon with the Royal Medical Corps.<sup>1</sup> Horsley had been stationed in Mesopotamia where thousands of wounded British and Indian troops had been stranded in mud without medical care or supplies during the approach to Baghdad in January 1916. In the aftermath, a small inquiry team known as the Vincent-Bingley Commission had been sent to investigate the scale of the harm and ensure that the unnecessary suffering of deployed troops had ceased.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by a Research Project Grant from the Leverhulme Trust [grant number RPG-2020-009], <<https://warningsfromthearchive.exeter.ac.uk/>>.

<sup>2</sup> K. Roy, *Indian Army and the First World War: 1914–1918* (OUP, 2018), 304–58; S. Das Gupta, 'From Victory to Defeat: The Indian Army in Mesopotamia, 1914–1916', in A. Kumar and C. Markovits, eds, *Indian Soldiers in the First World War* (Abingdon, 2020), 104–23.

Horsley wrote to the BMJ querying the credibility of the commission that, he believed, would falsely attribute the scandal to frontline ‘failures’ of individual medical and military officers rather than on a systemic breakdown in communications between the India Government and the field officers, as well as a general lack of resources. Horsley died in Mesopotamia from heatstroke 10 days after posting his letter, but the editor of the BMJ agreed with its message. ‘A Voice from the Dead’ complained of Vincent-Bingley: ‘Must it ever be in the case of medical matters that only those who know nothing about them should be appointed judges?’<sup>3</sup> Horsley’s letter and the BMJ’s article exemplify a recurrent criticism that commissions of inquiry overlook the systemic causes of failures and overstate the importance of individual responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Such criticism casts doubt on the assumption that inquiries are capable of accurately making sense of complex problems, such as wartime failure, and raise the question of how their composition and practices influence its findings.

This article approaches these questions through Vincent-Bingley’s successor: the Mesopotamia Commission (1916–17). Established in August 1916 at the height of the war and immediately following the publication of the Vincent-Bingley report, the Mesopotamia Commission was created to address a growing British crisis of national confidence in its military power provoked by a series of military failures such as defeat at Kut-el-Amara in Mesopotamia. This crisis that demanded a more substantial narrative for the campaign in Mesopotamia than the small-scale Vincent-Bingley commission had provided. The commission published its report to parliament in July 1917. The commission was expected to publicly demonstrate that failure would not happen again. Britain had long relied upon public inquiries to restore order following scandal or outrage.<sup>5</sup> The instrument promised scrutiny, expert legitimacy, and objectivity. However, just as Horsley implies in his critique of Vincent-Bingley, this reassurance came at the expense of grasping the systemic underpinnings of the crisis.<sup>6</sup>

This article identifies the granular levels of the commission’s political character and demonstrates how the inquiry’s partial knowledge and interests were made legitimate. Going beyond the findings of the published commission report, we examine the power of the commission itself whilst operating under an expert and legalistic guise. Through archival analysis, this article makes three key arguments. First, although the Mesopotamia Commission promised legal powers and objectivity, its establishment context and staffing choices shaped subtle biases in attention and methodology. Secondly, the commission’s grasp of the crisis was heavily influenced by the logistical challenges of imperial governance in India as well as London government officials’ belief in the responsibility and neglect of the Indian Army leadership. Finally, we show how the commission’s expert-led and quasi-legal processes triggered damaging personal consequences (exacted neither from the published report nor conventional disciplinary processes) and a dilution in state attention dedicated to the structural factors in the crisis.

The Mesopotamia Commission has received less academic attention than the 1915–16 Gallipoli campaign and its subsequent inquiry and report, published in 1919.<sup>7</sup> Where the Commission has received attention, military historical scholarship of the Mesopotamia

<sup>3</sup> ‘A Voice from the Dead’, *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1916), 261–2.

<sup>4</sup> A. Brown, ‘Authoritative Sensemaking in a Public Inquiry Report’, *Organization Studies*, 25, (2010), 95–112; A. Williams, ‘Public Inquiry into State Violence: the Epistemic Question’, *Critical Military Studies*, (2023), 1–28.

<sup>5</sup> J. Strong, ‘Sometimes the Fact an Inquiry Happens Matters More Than What It Finds: The Sebastopol Committee of 1855’, *Critical Military Studies*, (forthcoming); O. Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigation and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, 2006); B. Lauriat, ‘“The Examination of Everything” – Royal Commissions in British Legal History’, *Statute Law Review*, 31 (2010), 24–46.

<sup>6</sup> A. Syk, ‘The 1917 Mesopotamia Commission: Britain’s First Iraq Inquiry’, *RUSI*, 154 (2009), 94–101.

<sup>7</sup> For example: N. A. Lambert, *The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster: How Globalized Trade Led Britain to Its Worst Defeat of the First World War* (Oxford, 2022); C. M. Bell, *Churchill and the Dardanelles* (Oxford, 2017); J. Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli* (Manchester, 2004).

campaign predominately underscores conclusions about the campaign's failure, thus uncritically approaching the inquiry itself. Literature on the Commission tends to not go beyond a narrative outline of its origins, investigation, and findings, rather than on how the selective processes of the inquiry protected the state during the war.<sup>8</sup> Only Nadia Atia, influenced by David French,<sup>9</sup> has drawn attention to the potential of comparing the final report of the commission and its archival holdings, arguing that there were conspicuous absences in the published findings in contrast to the evidence heard.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by Atia's scholarship, we take a step back to the commission's beginnings and trace its operations to examine the political functions and internal decisions of the commission staff, shedding light on the 'black box' of this state-led inquiry through the commission's internal documents and correspondence.

This article contributes to global and colonial historiographies of British imperial rule and international power during the First World War. New scholarship has drawn attention to an early twentieth-century moment of transformation in international violence, internationalism, and imperial reckoning for Britain. These scholars have examined the changing personnel and mechanisms of imperial power following the professionalization of political classes in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, Susan Pedersen's *The Guardians*, Emily Baughan's *Saving the Children*, and Margot Tudor's *Blue Helmet Bureaucrats* have all recently shed light on the expansion of power for the mid-level bureaucrats of (inter)national officialdom, highlighting the political agency of their decision-making and their function in the creation of shared truths and intra-organizational cultures of sense-making.<sup>11</sup> This article builds on this new generation of international history and contributes a more complex understanding of the mid-level officials and intra-imperial tensions 'behind the curtain' of Britain's imperial bureaucracy, focusing on the consequences to—often concealed—field-based officials rather than just on leadership figures in the metropole. It examines this shifting dynamic from aristocratic to professional political administration by tracing Britain's shifting power relations with India throughout the First World War and the increasingly independent role of the Government of India. By early 1916, the pressures of the First World War had brought the fractures in imperial relations between the British Government, the India Government, and the colonized Indian population to the fore.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the Indian Army was deployed to the British frontlines, with thousands sent to Mesopotamia, the India Government was anxious about maintaining imperial authority as political tensions from the colonized population grew. Although this transformation in imperial relations was being felt by the British officials in India, it was not yet fully appreciated in London.<sup>13</sup> The Mesopotamia Commission's demands for witnesses and documents from the India Government aggravated ongoing intra-imperial tensions and anxieties, bringing them to the attention of London officials:

<sup>8</sup> *Inter alia* P. K. Davis, *Ends and Means: The British Mesopotamian Campaign and Commission* (New Jersey, 1994); C. Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914–1921* (London, 2010); K. C. Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London, 2014); R. Wilcox, *Battles on the Tigris: The Mesopotamian Campaign of the First World War* (Barnsley, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> D. French, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914–1916', *War & Society*, 5 (1987), 45–61.

<sup>10</sup> N. Atia, *World War I in Mesopotamia* (London, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> S. Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2013); E. Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire* (Berkeley, 2020); M. Tudor, *Blue Helmet Bureaucrats: United Nations Peacekeeping and the Reinvention of Colonialism, 1945–1971* (Cambridge, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> S. Das, 'Imperialism, Nationalism and the First World War in India', in *Finding Common Ground: New Directions in First World War Studies* (Leiden, 2011), 67–85. See also K. Imy, *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army*, (Stanford, 2019); G. Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire At War: From Jihad to Victory, The Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War* (London, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009); S. R. Chowdhury, *The First World War, Anticolonialism and Imperial Authority in British India, 1914–1924* (Abingdon, 2019).

the war was changing British imperial rule in India and a political solution was swiftly required if authority was to be maintained.

We build upon the rich and interdisciplinary literature on the influential role of inquiries in shaping the character and conduct of war (and the role of the state more broadly).<sup>14</sup> Existing scholarship on public inquiries and commissions usually falls into three main categories: summaries or discursive analyses of the report findings, critiques of these findings based on the author's own interpretation of the archive, or investigations of how and to what extent the state has learnt from the lessons identified in the report.<sup>15</sup> Often this literature either overlooks the internal practices and epistemic processes that shape the knowledge claims within inquiry reports or the voices included within inquiry archives.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, it should not be surprising that public inquiries are selective in their knowledge production; however, our contribution is to show *how* these selections are made legitimate through the inquiry process. Indeed, Nicolas Lambert has argued that 'The reports produced by the Dardanelles Commission have had an outsized influence on subsequent histories of the Gallipoli operation ... It could fairly be said that these reports have served as a foundational source for all subsequent scholarship on the Dardanelles'.<sup>17</sup> By using archival documents and taking a critical approach to the commission's methodology, we show how the inquiry (and its archive) was shaped by a specific imperial context in 1916–17: the commission's staffing, recovery of documents, and treatment of witnesses were politically and historically contingent.

By tracing its methodological processes, we demonstrate how the commission operated on behalf of the state to constrain the crisis and legitimate its political system whilst providing a simple and acceptable individualistic narrative of responsibility for the British political elite and public. In the first section, we examine how the commission was established because of political pressures upon the government to reform the British military in 1916 following a series of dramatic military failures. We next analyse the logistical pressures and intra-imperial tensions of undertaking the commission whilst it was both—paradoxically—*motivated* and *obstructed* by the ongoing demands of the First World War. In the final section, we uncover the personal repercussions of the report during and in the immediate aftermath of publication: first, we trace the legal limitations of the evidence collected during the inquiry and the damage caused by state officials' deference towards the commission and, secondly, we argue that the commission encouraged its witnesses to make sense of the crisis through individual responsibility rather than through structural factors: the excision of the 'bad apples' and the effective conduct of 'good' war standards.

## Personnel and power: performing a commission at a time of crisis

The primary political goal in the establishment of the Mesopotamia Commission was to resolve a crisis of confidence in British military power through a carefully choreographed

<sup>14</sup> *Inter alia* S. Farson and M. Pythian, eds, *Commissions of Inquiry and National Security* (Santa Barbara, 2011); A. Stark, *Public Inquiries, Policy Learning and the Threat of Future Crises* (Oxford, 2018); C. Greer and E. McLaughlin, 'Theorizing Institutional Scandal and the Regulatory State', *Theoretical Criminology*, 21 (2017), 112–32; A. Burgess, 'The Changing Character of Public Inquiries in the (risk) Regulatory State', *British Politics*, 6 (2011), 3–29.

<sup>15</sup> *Inter alia* L. Kettle, *Learning from the History of British Interventions in the Middle East* (Edinburgh, 2019); D. Coole, 'Agency, Truth and Meaning: Judging the Hutton Report', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005), 465–85; E. O'Halpin, 'British Intelligence and the Case for Confronting Iraq: Evidence from the Butler and Hutton Reports', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 16 (2005), 89–102. Keller, M. R., 'When is the State's Gaze Focused?', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27 (2014), 204–35.

<sup>16</sup> Cf.; Oz Frankel, 'Scenes of Commission: Royal Commissions of Inquiry and the Culture of Social Investigation in Early Victorian Britain', *The European Legacy*, 4 (1999), 20–41; Barbara Lauriat, 'The Examination of Everything': Royal Commissions in British Legal History', *Statute Law Review*, 31 (2010), 24–46; O. Thomas, M. Tudor, and C. Pennell, 'Public Inquiries into Conflict and Security: Scandals, Archives, and the Politics of Epistemology', *BJPIR*, (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481231221473>.

<sup>17</sup> Lambert, *The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster*, 10.

tableau of establishment figures, technocracy, and quasi-legalism.<sup>18</sup> These techniques professed impartiality, expertise, and credibility but actually introduced subtle biases in attention and methodology, shaping future understandings of the crisis. Like many inquiries, the Mesopotamia Commission coincided with a time of political vulnerability for British Prime Minister H. H. Asquith's government, following a raft of British military catastrophes. Asquith's choice in staffing the commission, despite an ostensibly balanced, impartial 'complexion', crafted a group of elites: nine establishment men. The bounded nature of the commission—where it could and could not exert authority in the extraction of evidence—and its performative and affective function was critical to stabilizing and reproducing discourses and institutions of power. This section examines the political context in Britain in 1916 and shows how a series of military disasters in the war and domestic parliamentary factionalism fostered the conditions for the creation of the commission.

The Mesopotamia Commission was established in a moment of intensifying demands for a shift in the governance of the war, as well as commanders at the field level.<sup>19</sup> The commissioners were tasked with investigating the Mesopotamia campaign and its failures during the withdrawal of the British and Indian troops along the River Tigris after the Battle of Ctesiphon, 22–26 November 1915. Once politicians, such as (Francis) David Charteris, 12th Earl of Wemyss and 8th Earl of March, recognized the political currency of this 'scandal' in July 1916, they amplified the reports of failure and suffering from the frontlines and prompted Asquith to react and install an inquiry.<sup>20</sup> This larger commission was private, operating on an invitation-only basis, and the publication of the report in July 1917 was similarly controlled, restricting full access to parliamentary members and relevant military officials. Critiquing issues of miscommunication, an overconfident strategy for capturing the region, and a pre-war decision by bureaucrats in London to reduce military and medical resources to the Indian Army, the commission report emphasized the 'appalling conditions' suffered by the troops and the attempts by field officers to cover-up the incident, noting that: 'Not a hint of this regrettable breakdown is to be found in the official report sent to England after the battle.'<sup>21</sup>

However, the Mesopotamia Campaign was not just recognized as a crisis for the political elites in government. Early in 1916, information in private letters from officers serving in Mesopotamia reached Britain, producing (what a BMJ article described as) a 'very unfavourable impression' amounting to a belief that 'a serious breakdown had occurred and was not being remedied'.<sup>22</sup> Others discovered details about the crisis through small campaigns, such as the 'Comforts Fund' for the Hampshire Regiment, to collect and donate supplies.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, although the report was not publicly published in full, broadsheet newspapers published sections of the findings and quoted the report at length.<sup>24</sup> These front-page articles directed readers' attention to the individuals named and censured by the report,

<sup>18</sup> We use the term 'quasi-legalism' to describe the additional legal powers afforded to the commission as it straddled both legal and political spheres. Despite the novelty of these legal privileges, such as the power to take testimony under oath, being a core aspect of the commissioners' authority, we show that in practice these privileges were largely artificial and meaningless under scrutiny. This term allows us to address the commission's supposed legal character whilst recognizing, ultimately, its performativity (existing more to claim the commission's evidence—and, thus, findings—legitimacy than to fulfil a legalistic standard with a burden of proof). For more on this term, see D. Elliott and M. McGuinness, 'Public Inquiry: Panacea or Placebo?', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 10 (2002), 14–25. For more on the coercive legal power of oaths, see G. Gillian and J. Pratt, eds, *Crime, Truth and Justice: Official Inquiry, discourse, and knowledge* (Abingdon, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> 'Asquith discusses neglect of troops: Intimates that Mesopotamia Expedition, despite assurances, lacked medical attention', *The New York Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1916.

<sup>20</sup> HL Deb 20 July 1916, vol. 22, col. 844.

<sup>21</sup> British National Archives (BNA), WO 106/911, 'Mesopotamia Commission: Report', 1917, 76–77.

<sup>22</sup> 'A Voice from the Dead', *BMJ*.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Hampshires in Mesopotamia 1915-18 and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara', <<https://www.royalhampshireregiment.org/about-the-museum/timeline/mesopotamia-1915/>> accessed 3 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> N. Atia, 'A Wartime Tourist Trail: Mesopotamia in the British Imagination, 1914–1918', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 16 (2012), 404.

re-entrenching the methodological individualism of the report.<sup>25</sup> Thus, although most of the British public could not legally vote at this point, the support of the British population was critical for the upkeep of morale and material production during the war.

This public awareness cultivated political criticism of British military leadership. Following British failures at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia in early 1916, politicians, such as Andrew Bonar Law and David Lloyd George, argued that too many lives were being lost and that Britain needed new parliamentary leadership to reinvigorate military efforts—even after the creation of the coalition between the Liberal and the Conservative parties in May 1915.<sup>26</sup> The country needed to refocus its efforts on the frontlines and centralize command (rather than relying on the bloated bureaucracies and subcommittees installed by Asquith).<sup>27</sup> The ongoing violence of the Battle of the Somme throughout summer 1916, during which Asquith's eldest son was killed, dealt a 'death-blow in Britain to the remaining idealistic and romantic attitudes to war', shaking Asquith's ability to govern.<sup>28</sup> We argue that, as a consequence of this domestic political pressure in August 1916, the establishment of the Mesopotamia Commission came to play a significant role in Asquith's attempts to hold onto power as Prime Minister and demonstrate his willingness to revise his war strategy in an atmosphere of popular critique. This strategy to regain popularity failed and his party replaced him with David Lloyd George in December 1916.

During this tense period, Asquith recognized the potential for the revelation of past conditions in Mesopotamia to become a public scandal and a threat to the ongoing British war effort in the Middle East. It was clear in his mind that during the sensitive period of wartime, a commission was preferable to open debate in the House of Commons:

In pointing out to the House these difficulties I am not deprecating inquiry, but I am only showing that an inquiry conducted in the middle of a war like this must be conducted with great discretion and subject to very severe limitations, and above all, with strict and scrupulous determination that it shall not interfere with the active conduct of operations in the field.<sup>29</sup>

A public debate would signal 'to the world outside that we are ... divided among ourselves' amid a global conflict that was ideologically founded upon notions of national unity.<sup>30</sup> Internally, his liberal colleagues were far from convinced that an inquiry would benefit their Party or the country's war effort.<sup>31</sup> However, for Asquith the commission would challenge his political enemies' assertions that he was unable to manage the state at war.<sup>32</sup> It would provide authoritative confirmation that the British Empire remained militarily superior and that those responsible had been removed from the frontlines. The commission can be understood as, for Asquith, an exercise in performative power, an attempt to demonstrate control, and a commitment to liberal values.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For more on the British press' range of reporting on the Mesopotamia Commission, please see M. Sehgal and S. Sehwat, 'Scandal in Mesopotamia: Press, Empire, and India during the First World War', *Modern Asian Studies*, 54 (2020), 1395–445.

<sup>26</sup> Lambert, *The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> M. Johnson, 'Civilian and Military Power (Great Britain and Ireland)', in *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (2019), <[https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/civilian\\_and\\_military\\_power\\_great\\_britain\\_and\\_ireland](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/civilian_and_military_power_great_britain_and_ireland)>

<sup>28</sup> G. H. Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader* (London, 1994), 196–7.

<sup>29</sup> House of Commons, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1916, vol. 84. cc1236-91.

<sup>30</sup> House of Commons, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1916, vol. 84. cc1236-91.

<sup>31</sup> G. H. Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader* (London, 1994), 201; House of Commons, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1916, vol. 84. cc1236-91; 'A Mesopotamia Inquiry: Expert Commission to be Formed, War Office Now in Command', *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 July 1916.

<sup>32</sup> Lambert, *The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Scholars have explored the relationship between performance and power in varied contexts. *Inter alia* T. Bentley, 'A Line under the Past: Performative Temporal Segregation in Transitional Justice', *Journal of Human Rights*, 20 (2021), 598–613; M. Morgan, 'Performance and Power in Social Movements: Biko's Role as a



The Commission was given royal assent on 17 August 1916 and held its first hearing 5 days later.<sup>34</sup> Chaired by Lord George Hamilton (a Conservative politician, First Lord of the Admiralty, and past Secretary of State for India), the commission included seven other establishment men from a range of different political camps: the Earl of Donoughmore, Sir Neville Lytton, Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge, as well as four members of parliament, Sir Hugh Cecil, Sir Archibald Williamson, John Hodge, and Commander Josiah Wedgwood. The commissioners were established figures of authority, some of whom had ‘played’ this role before in other inquiries.<sup>35</sup> It was reported that the ‘complexion’ of the Commission was ‘favourably received’ within the international media, emphasizing that Asquith’s choices were ostensibly absent of political bias or imbalance, despite the overt political powers of the commissioners.<sup>36</sup> Many of the commissioners were ‘centrists’, such as Cecil and Wedgwood, demonstrating the inquiry’s efforts to be politically inclusive across the party spectrum. Although the commissioners were selected to provide a ‘broad church’ of careers, political positions, and religious affiliations, their shared deference to the establishment shaped their methodological approach to the inquiry process. Their establishment positions informed their assessment of the perceived transgression in Mesopotamia and their approach to witnesses as we explore below—many of whom were already known and had been part of the same military and political networks in London.

The commission was also granted quasi-legal powers that were an unusual innovation for an inquiry. This was despite the fact that the committee members had no legal experience—except for its chairman, Hamilton, who had served as a Justice of Peace for Middlesex and Westminster. The remainder were new to formal witnessing processes and procedures. The commission itself was, however, a significant legal undertaking. To legitimize the testimonies and statements submitted by witnesses the commission was, unusually, empowered to take these under legal oath (whereas an ad-hoc departmental committee or inquiry could not). This power later led to difficulties as, although witnesses provided evidence under oath, their testimony was not legally of the same standard as that collected in a traditional court. Thus, whilst the evidentiary standards of the commission were ostensibly credible—providing an impressive expert guise for the public—they crumbled under any meaningful legal scrutiny.

The commission relied upon two primary sources of evidence to support its investigation into the Mesopotamia Campaign, both of which were subject to the commissioners’ methodological bias: official documents and witness testimony. First, official documents were treated uncritically and as reports of fact, rather than as objects of scrutiny, as can be observed from the inclusion of officers’ telegrams and accounts from the ground in the published commission report.<sup>37</sup> Whereas the collection of witness testimony was a more active process where the commissioners attempted to cultivate an interrogative environment, but it was still methodologically subject to the commissioners’ respect for the witnesses. There was an elastic, even collaborative, dynamic between the witnesses and the commissioners. A victim of their own small witness pool, the commissioners were aware that witnesses frequently spoke to one another to clarify narratives under the auspices of wishing to ‘refresh one’s memory’.<sup>38</sup> The commissioners’ respect also extended to including witnesses in the organization of the inquiry. R. G. Duff, the Commission Secretary requested that General Sir Edmund Barrow, Military Secretary to the India Office—who had himself been

Witness in the SASO/BPC Trial’, *Cultural Sociology*, 12 (2018), 456–77; M. Woods, ‘Performing Power: Local Politics and the Taunton Pageant of 1928’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25 (1999), 57–74.

<sup>34</sup> The wording of the Commission Bill of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1916 was based on precedents set by the Special Commissions Acts of 1885 and 1888, and the Metropolitan Police Commission of 1886.

<sup>35</sup> Both Bridge and Williamson had been involved in inquiries prior to the Mesopotamia Commission.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Dardanelles and Mesopotamia: Personnel of Commissions’, *The Times of India*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1916; ‘Mesopotamia and Dardanelles’ Commission’, *South China Morning Post*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1916.

<sup>37</sup> British Library (BL), IOR/L/PJ/6/1495, ‘Mesopotamia Commission report’.

<sup>38</sup> BNA, CAB 19/13, ‘Letter from Barrow to General Sir John Nixon’, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1916.

requested to provide testimony—reviewed and commented on a list of sick and wounded officers from the Indian Army in Mesopotamia who had returned to England. Of the 150 names, Barrow highlighted a handful of names ‘whose evidence might be useful’.<sup>39</sup> This friendly exchange suggested that the commission was aware of the limits of its own expertise, relying on its witnesses to help curate the evidence they sought.<sup>40</sup> It also cemented the commission staff’s innate deference and trust in the witnesses—all of whom were also elite establishment men—thus in tension with the projected objective character of the inquiry.

However, unlike the uncritical inclusion of official documents in the report, witnesses were subject to a greater level of scrutiny. Witnesses were not allowed to alter or amend their evidence once it had been submitted and integrated into the report draft.<sup>41</sup> In March 1917, before the circulation of the preliminary Mesopotamia Commission report, Barrow tried to assert himself by requesting that certain paragraphs should be deleted as ‘they are not relevant’.<sup>42</sup> Duff expressed his sympathy before politely explaining that the request could not be authorized. When Barrow insisted, Duff responded more forcefully to assert that Hamilton, the commission’s chairman, ‘is unable to waive in your case ... [as] by Act of Parliament ... all evidence given before them is to remain on record’.<sup>43</sup>

The Mesopotamia Commission thus was an attempt to offer a state-choreographed response to a crisis in British domestic and imperial power. Repeated British military failures in 1916 had provoked international *and* domestic attention. The establishment of the Mesopotamia Commission was born out of Asquith’s attempt to appease and accept the need to reform his approach to war command. The commission’s claim to legitimacy as an instrument of power stemmed from its recognizable script, directorship, stage, and set of actors which were all grounded in a form of legalism familiar to the British political establishment. The set-up and execution of the commission conformed to expectations of the aesthetics of this type of political performance and its legalistic authority further projected the inquiry as a balanced, impartial investigation despite its own methodological biases. It promoted discourses of continuity and reinforced political structures and elites at a time of great instability.

## Prioritizing during the war: logistical challenges and intra-imperial fractures

Once established, the commission’s grasp of the crisis was heavily influenced by the logistical challenges of imperial governance. This led to an ironic yet critically important deficiency in the commission’s work: under-resourcing of the India Government by London had been a significant factor in the original crisis and yet that same structural problem would prevent the India Government from fully participating in the investigation. This section shows how the inquiry’s core purpose—to restore the military reputation of the British government—was logistically challenged by the very same context that had made the creation of the commission so urgent for Asquith in July 1916: the ongoing First World War. It also examines how this pressure for witnesses to travel from active positions on the frontlines ignited intra-imperial tensions on Indian governance and accusations of poor British colonial rule in the region in preparation for *and* during the war. British leadership struggled to know what to prioritize: the commission’s requests for witnesses to return to London or the continued presence of personnel on the frontlines? Which would most serve the national war effort? This section examines how this dilemma developed by tracing the

<sup>39</sup> BNA, CAB19/17, ‘Letter from Barrow to the Secretary, Mesopotamia Commission’, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1916.

<sup>40</sup> BNA, CAB 19/10, ‘Letter from Major-General V.B. Kemball to the Secretary, Mesopotamia Commission’, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1917.

<sup>41</sup> BNA, CAB 19/18, ‘Letter and attached analysis from Aylmer to the Mesopotamia Commission’, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1917.

<sup>42</sup> BNA, CAB 19/17, ‘Letter from Barrow to the Secretary, Mesopotamia Commission’, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

<sup>43</sup> BNA, CAB 19/17, ‘Letter from the Secretary, Mesopotamia Commission to Barrow’, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

Commission's request for two key Indian Service officials to return to Britain and provide evidence in the Mesopotamia Commission despite their ongoing deployment: Captain Walter Lumsden and Surgeon-General Sir Pardey Charles Lukis.

The rapidly shifting geographies and pressures of the First World War made it increasingly difficult for the commission to locate and request the attendance of active military and medical officials as witnesses. While the siege of Kut had ended in failure in late April 1916, this aspect of the Allied campaign against Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire, in the Middle East was not over and personnel were still present on the frontlines.<sup>44</sup> Although, for some military leadership, the obligation to recall active personnel from duty was a logistical nightmare and a distraction from the strategic demands on the front line, many within the British military and—in particular—the Indian Government were invested in ensuring that their staff were called as witnesses and given the opportunity to offer their perspective on the Mesopotamia Campaign. Sir Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, emphasized the India Office's compliance and transparency with the commission process, ensuring that 'copies of all documents in the possession of the India Office which are material to their enquiry'.<sup>45</sup> Despite this large transfer of files, the Indian Office and Indian Government officials worried that they would be blamed for the failings in Mesopotamia by the Commission. Seeking to defend their decision-making and structures against—what they perceived—as an incoming hostile attack from London-based officials on their imperial administration of India, the officials worked to prepare their 'case' for the commission.

On 29 September 1916, Duff, Mesopotamia Commission secretary, wrote to the India Office to request that General Sir Fenton Aylmer, Brigadier-General Kemball, Surgeon-General Sir Pardey Lukis, and Captain Lumsden attend the inquiry to provide evidence.<sup>46</sup> Although Duff's letter acknowledged that the witness process would disrupt the Indian Government officials' participation in the war, he also emphasized testifying as an opportunity for the personnel to give their perspective on the crisis. Keen to ensure that the Indian Government was not wholly critiqued by the witnesses presented by the London-based War Office officials, the Indian Government staff recognized that they would have to go beyond the delivery of files and send this requested small number of personnel to the commission. Internal memos within the Indian Government throughout October reveal the level of anxious pre-planning and strategizing put in place for these summoned staff, ensuring that their statements lined up with the files already in possession by the Mesopotamia Commission and making lists of unanswered questions to resolve before their witnesses spoke.<sup>47</sup> The Mesopotamia Commission would soon become the stage for these intra-imperial tensions on the issue of Indian administration to fracture: the Indian Government was fiercely defensive of their decision-making and intent on not shouldering the blame for the entire crisis.

The Indian Government leadership was limited by the administration's lack of resources and staffing—two of the same issues that had also contributed to the crisis in Mesopotamia on the frontlines. Although 'both General Sir Fenton Aylmer and Brigadier General Kemball' could be 'made available if required, and that temporary arrangements for their relief will be made on the receipt of official orders', Chelmsford—who had recently replaced Lord Hardinge as Viceroy for India—resisted removing Lumsden and Lukis from the frontlines. For the Indian Government, Lukis was especially important on the frontlines, 'owing to the importance of his duties, both civil and military, and the dearth of

<sup>44</sup> Baghdad was captured by the British Army on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

<sup>45</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, statement to Mesopotamia Commission', 14<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

<sup>46</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Letter from Duff to India Office', 29<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

<sup>47</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Telegram from Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, to Chelmsford, Viceroy', 16<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

senior officers available to replace him'.<sup>48</sup> He also suggested that the removal of Lumsden would be a complicated military jurisdiction issue as the official also served as a Senior Naval official, echoing the overcomplicated lines of authority that also impeded decision-making during both the Gallipoli and Mesopotamia campaigns. These struggles over the transport of specific staff created a situation in which the witnesses—and therefore the dominant perspective of 'evidence' collected—were shaped by the personnel that were deemed 'available' or 'disposable' in late 1916. In short, those who were 'in demand', valuable, and recognized as too experienced to lose were significantly less likely to have their 'evidence' taken by the Mesopotamia Commission.

As the abstract preparations for the commission became a bureaucratic reality in late 1916, those involved in Indian government decision-making during the Mesopotamia crisis sought to delegitimize the methodological approach of the inquiry and its inadequate understanding of wartime operations. Once the Mesopotamia Commission sent the India Office their list of requested witnesses in late September 1916, the India Office became anxious that these individuals would not sufficiently defend the interests and decision-making of the Indian Government (or the India Office—which had separate but related interests). In correspondence with Chamberlain, R. G. Duff, representing the commission, emphasized that the inquiry did not intend to 'connect individually with that responsibility those who were not then in office, or who when in office had no responsible hand in the Campaign'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the commission received a memorandum by Sir Beauchamp Duff, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, on behalf of the Indian Government, in November requesting permission for the Government of India *itself* to act as a witness in the commission and defend the institution from criticism, challenging the individualized, legalistic paradigm of the commission. Concerned that the institution of governance would itself be the target of accusations of poor governance and subject to greater resource cuts and dilutions of imperial power, Duff argued the value in mustering an institutional defence at the Mesopotamia Commission. T. W. Holderness, Under Secretary of State for India, forwarded nine copies of Duff's letter for each commissioner and wrote to the chair, Hamilton, to emphasize the Indian Government leadership's request 'that they should be allowed an opportunity of representing their views to the Commission before the Commission come to any final conclusions' on the topic of responsibility for the crisis.<sup>50</sup> Troubled by the idea that the Government of India would be unfairly or *unjustly* undermined—or further under-resourced—as a result of the commission's investigation, the Indian Government leadership attacked not only the commission's individualization methodology but also the idea that individual witnesses could meaningfully elucidate on such a complex set of events on a meso- (or intra-governmental/organizational) level.

Hamilton drafted his response to Duff's attack on the inquiry's methodology, failing to comprehend the larger intra-imperial politics at work within his commission processes. He disagreed with Duff's accusation that the individualistic, legalistic approach of the commission was unsuitable for interrogating into the broader, institutional pressures at the time. Missing Duff's point and focusing on the comprehensive collection of witnesses, Hamilton argued that the Mesopotamia Commission's purpose was not censure or criticism towards individuals—despite this being an explicit purpose of the commission, as outlined by Asquith.<sup>51</sup> He pointed out that many Indian Government officials would be providing their testimony at the commission and that they would—collectively—provide the voice of the institution. Vexed by Hamilton's deficient response, Holderness forwarded it and a personal note to Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India. He argued that Hamilton had

<sup>48</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Barrow letter on behalf of Viceroy to Hamilton', 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1916.

<sup>49</sup> BNA, CAB 19/14, 'Letter from the Secretary, Mesopotamia Commission to Chamberlain', 17<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

<sup>50</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Letter from T. W. Holderness to Hamilton', 9<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

<sup>51</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Letter from Hamilton to Chamberlain', 17<sup>th</sup> November 1916, 6.

failed to appreciate the unique political issues faced by the Indian Government leadership and the India Office during the Mesopotamia Campaign. For Duff and Holderness, the Mesopotamia Commission had interrupted a much larger debate on the transformation of British imperial authority in India and the commissioners' questions (and subsequent analysis in their report) would be unable to fully comprehend—or, perhaps, generously appreciate the difficulty of—decision-making during the Mesopotamia Campaign in isolation of these larger imperial shifts and demands:

It speaks of judging individuals, and professes to reassure the Viceroy and his colleagues and other prominent officials that judgement will not be pushed upon them. But the [Government of India]'s point is that it is not merely individuals who are being tried. It is the system of the [Government of India]—specifically the military and medical system—that is in the dock. They wish to show extenuating circumstances and to prevent the system from being unfairly condemned. It is in many ways important to prevent the Indian Government as a system from being held up to opprobrium and dragged on the mud before the [?] ... of this country. Hitherto as an administration machine it has been regarded with respect ... by those who attack it as irresponsible to the new desires and aspirations of the Indian people. It may soon lose this aspect of respectability as the result of an inquiry held by a [?] ... who are ready to sentence before they were heard.<sup>52</sup>

Holderness' letter revealed his intention to alert the commissioners to the larger intra-governmental tensions between the imperial centre and periphery (in India) during the First World War. For the leadership of the Government of India, the First World War was not the only source of military anxiety in 1916–17. Despite initial support for the war in 1914—from several Indian nationalists, including Mahatma Gandhi, who believed that compliance with the metropole would pay dividends in terms of India's demands for extensive post-war constitutional reform after the war—the move towards honouring any move towards self-government was slow.<sup>53</sup> The pressures of the war, caused by recruitment, higher taxes, limited food supplies, deteriorating health conditions, and higher prices, increasingly made day-to-day life across all home fronts difficult. India was no exception.<sup>54</sup> As socio-economic conditions declined, so too did the political climate, and revolutionary activity intensified.<sup>55</sup> Paradoxically, the size and scale of the First World War—which caused Britain to lean so heavily on its colonies—also created the very pressures on India (and other territories) that had provoked nationalists to question the nature of the Anglo-Indian imperial relationship. Thus, the higher the Indian 'blood sacrifice' on the battlefield, the greater Britain's reliance on imperial contributions became. But this came at a price: increasing demands for a revision and reconstitution of Britain's governance of India along democratic principles equivalent to the British Empire's white dominions.<sup>56</sup> This political context put pressure on the Indian Government and made the leadership resentful that the British officials in London did not appreciate the extent of ongoing political tensions and the security demands this placed on their imperial administration. The Indian Government recognized that the commission would analyse the Indian Army and the Indian Government's decision-making in Mesopotamia in isolation of these greater pressures,

<sup>52</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Internal minute on Chamberlain's response to Holderness', 20<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

<sup>53</sup> See G. Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire at War: From Jihad to Victory, the Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War* (London, 2018). It was not until August 1917 that Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, stated that self-government was not going to be a constitutional status reserved for white colonies.

<sup>54</sup> A. Kumar Bagchi, 'Indian Economy and Society during World War One', *Social Scientist*, 42 (2014), 5–27.

<sup>55</sup> V. Kant, *'If I Die Here Who Will Remember Me?': Indian and the First World War* (New Delhi, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> For a micro-history of these tensions, T. Tai-Yong, 'An Imperial Home-Front: Punjab and the First World War', *The Journal of Military History*, 64 (2009), 371–410.

comparing their contributions to that of Britain or other allied settler colonies without appreciating the particularity of the context in India. This intra-imperial hierarchy remained largely invisible to the commissioners in any meaningful way.

In response to Holderness, Chamberlain challenged his beliefs and asserted that he was sure that Hamilton knew that the Government of India were anxious to defend their institutions but that they should avoid using the Mesopotamia Commission as the forum for a Government of India *apologia*.<sup>57</sup> Chamberlain quashed Duff's complaint and approved of Hamilton's—insufficient—response to Duff. These internal debates within the India Office—let alone between the India Government, India Office, the War Office, and the Mesopotamia Commission—reveal that departments were far from united on their opinions on the Indian Government's responsibility for the crisis in Mesopotamia. In December 1916, Chamberlain wrote to Duff to placate the Commander.<sup>58</sup> Although Holderness acknowledged Hamilton's failure to address the methodological point and reflect on the competency of the commissioners to assess the Indian Government's responsibility for this crisis as an isolated event, this internal conflict between the commissioners and the Government of India failed to result in any meaningful shifts to the inquiry's analysis of the Indian Government.

As a result of these intra-imperial debates and the India Office's support of the commissioner's request, the Viceroy reluctantly released Lumsden from Indian Services and made him available to act as a witness in the Mesopotamia Commission in late 1916. Until Mesopotamia, Lumsden was a highly commended naval official, appointed as Director of the Royal Indian Marine at the beginning of the First World War. He was part of the group of remote India Government leaders during the Indian Army's involvement in the Mesopotamia Campaign, based in Bombay. As Duff predicted, Lumsden was individualized—becoming one of the twelve men eventually named in the published commission report<sup>59</sup>—and identified as one of the officials that had participated in the collective weakening and corrupting of the Indian Government's administration during the First World War. Lumsden was inattentive: he had 'failed to rise to the occasion' and, as a consequence of his negligence, the number of boats in Mesopotamia during the campaign were far below the adequate amount.<sup>60</sup> Lumsden resigned from his post as Director in May 1917 following the circulation of a preliminary Mesopotamia Commission report to the India Office in March 1917, the Viceroy quietly arranging a replacement in Bombay and Lumsden leave pay.<sup>61</sup> Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, emphasized in a written statement to the House of Commons that Lumsden's 'resignation was wholly unconnected with the Report of the Commission, which of course he had not seen'.<sup>62</sup> However, the timing of his resignation despite continued health—indeed, living until 1947—suggests that the naval official was made aware of the approaching controversy and how the commissioners had framed his role in the crisis, and asked to remove himself from military service so as to prepare for public reassurance that he was no longer in service.

Lukis, the other requested witness, had a starkly different experience with the commission. Lukis was not recalled from his position in India to act as a witness in the Mesopotamia Commission, despite the initial request from the Commissioners on 19 September 1916. This decision by the Commissioners to not demand his attendance was likely a combination of his value in Indian hospitals in late 1916 and his limited personal

<sup>57</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Internal minute on Chamberlain's response to Holderness', 20<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

<sup>58</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18112, 'Draft despatch from Chamberlain to Duff', 8<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

<sup>59</sup> Officials critiqued in the Mesopotamia Commission report: Nixon, Hardinge (prev. Viceroy), Sir Beauchamp Duff, Sir Edmund Barrow, Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India. Surgeons-general named: Babbie, Hathaway, McNeece, General Sir Fenton Aylmer, Captain Walter Lumsden, General Davidson, and Colonel Heir.

<sup>60</sup> BL, IOR/L/PJ/6/1495, 'Mesopotamia Commission report', 50.

<sup>61</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for War', September 1917.

<sup>62</sup> HC, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1917, 'Royal Indian Marine (Captain Lumsden)', vol. 95.

knowledge about the Mesopotamia Campaign as he had only become involved in the Mesopotamia crisis for a few months in the summer of 1916.<sup>63</sup> Lukis was part of the post-Mesopotamia crisis recovery phase once an increased number of beds, medical resources, and transport were provided on the ground. He was applauded in the Vincent-Bingley report for his work as a Surgeon-General in the hospitals in Bombay.<sup>64</sup> Lukis died in Simla shortly after the Mesopotamia Commission report was published but his inclusion in the report as one of the few successful officials has shaped his memory. In his *BMJ* obituary, his contribution to the war was framed through quotes from the Mesopotamia Commission report. This helps to show how significant the Commission was for not only assigning blame—as with Lumsden—but praise, acting as a form of morality recordkeeping for those involved in the crisis.<sup>65</sup> It was Lukis' contribution to the medical crisis in Mesopotamia that encouraged the Commissioners to reassure the British public that the situation in the field was much changed since the early months of 1916 and that 'a new spirit exists in the medical command in Mesopotamia'.<sup>66</sup> Lukis became a key part of the commission's efforts to restore public trust and morale in the British state to manage its military and protect its troops from unnecessary harm, valorizing him in opposition to the demonization of the India Government personnel, such as Lumsden.

The connection of these two individuals—however limited—to the Mesopotamia Commission helps reveal how the inquiry intersected with and interfered in this critical moment of intra-imperial power shifts. Of the requested officials from the India Government, Lukis was the only one to avoid named censure in the Mesopotamia Commission report. However, Lumsden *did* provide testimony to defend his actions. Lumsden's words became evidence for his own censure, used to further implicate him in his 'failure to rise to the occasion'.<sup>67</sup> However, within the context of the background intra-imperial debates over his testimony, his 'failure' is likely to refer more to commission's perception of the India Government's weaknesses rather than his own personal deficiencies. Thus, the comment about his inability to 'rise to the occasion' instead sheds light on the India Government's limitations in comparison with the contributions of other British colonies, and this collectively harming the British war effort and nationalist self-image.<sup>68</sup> The pressures of the First World War severely impacted upon intra-imperial relations and the distribution of resources across the empire, and this unequal distribution was violently tested in Mesopotamia. However, acknowledging the structural reasons for the India Government's contributions to the crisis in Mesopotamia would mean having to reckon with the British state's poor war planning and escalating security threats in India. The commission report into the crisis thus framed this complex moment of imperial change and reshaped governmental relationships as a familiar tale of 'bad apples' (now excised) and individual responsibility—a story further bolstered by the shift in the chain-of-command in Mesopotamia from the India Government to the War Office in London.<sup>69</sup>

### Legitimizing a scapegoat narrative: methodological individualization to make sense of war

The commission report was described by Attorney General Sir Frederick Smith as 'simply the cemetery of reputations', having prompted the resignation of Secretary of State for

<sup>63</sup> Mesopotamia Commission report, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Mesopotamia Commission report, 161.

<sup>65</sup> 'Sir Pardey Lukis', *BMJ*, 2 (1917), 569.

<sup>66</sup> Mesopotamia Commission report, 89.

<sup>67</sup> BL, IOR/L/PJ/6/1495, 'Mesopotamia Commission report', 50.

<sup>68</sup> BL, IOR/L/PJ/6/1495, 'Mesopotamia Commission report', 50.

<sup>69</sup> This shift in command to London also placated criticisms of Asquith's overly complicated structures of command. See P. T. Crowley, 'Operational Lessons of the Mesopotamia Campaign, 1914–18', *Defence Studies*, 4 (2004), 339.

India, Austen Chamberlain in July 1917 and the dismissal of Commander-in-Chief in India, Beauchamp Duff in June 1917. Other political figures, such as Lord Hardinge, weathered criticism in the national media and were vulnerable to losing their positions in government. Chamberlain used the attention of his resignation to promote the protection of other figures censured in the report, highlighting Hardinge's long career before the Mesopotamia crisis: 'It would be an evil day for this House and for this country if, because of any errors of judgment or of any miscalculation for which others are as much responsible as he, some of them more-responsible, a great public servant is to be hounded out of public life, without a trial and without a hearing, in answer to the clamours of an ill-informed and a passionate mob.'<sup>70</sup> However, the contents of the report was only *partially* responsible for the vast array of personal and political repercussions following the establishment of the Mesopotamia Commission and most of the leadership figures censured in the report survived this period of critique.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, despite Chamberlain's resignation in 1917, he returned to power as Chancellor as part of Lloyd George's coalition government in April 1918 and profited politically from his so-called principled resignation in the face of a 'peculiar' Indian administrative system.<sup>72</sup> In this section, we examine how, beyond the men who were named and censured in the report, it was largely the mid-level officials who experienced the most professionally and materially damaging outcomes due to the Commission, with the exception of Beauchamp Duff. We trace how the *processes* of the inquiry—rather than just the published report—caused damaging personal consequences for others who were not explicitly censured, nor subjected to any conventional disciplinary process. Comparable to an iceberg, the visible outputs of the commission—state evidence collected, witness testimony recorded, and report published to parliament—were only the 'tip', whereas the 'iceberg' of effects to official personnel had extensive repercussions that out-last the First World War.

We argue that the commission's processes fostered a predisposition towards individualizing responsibility. This section explores how British state officials' individualization of certain individuals and deference to the findings of the commission—as well as a sense of entitlement and expertise held *by* the commissioners—triggered serious professional and personal ramifications. We argue that the commission's *act* of asking questions about the campaign—inquiring into the names and details of officials present on the ground during the crisis—provoked a process of state blame, scapegoat 'justice', and punishment that would not have otherwise, (1) known to investigate these officials, and (2) had access to 'legitimate' evidence or testimony alleging wrongdoing sufficient for dismissal.<sup>73</sup> By tracing the consequences for India Army official, General Sir Fenton Aylmer, and Medical officer Major A. Murphy, this section examines how the commissioners used the perceived objective guise of their 'evidence' collecting process to justify their consultation on and interference in the question of these officials' continued employment by the state.

India Army military leader, General Sir Fenton Aylmer was first removed from the Command of the Tigris corps on 11 March 1916 in Mesopotamia and then subsequently removed from the Command of a Division in India on 16 May 1917.<sup>74</sup> From 1 June 1917, Aylmer was thus 'unemployed'.<sup>75</sup> Believing himself to have been punished twice (i.e., dismissed from two separate posts for the same incident during the Mesopotamia Campaign) and frustrated by the lack of information about his dismissal, Aylmer appealed. Unlike Lumsden, Aylmer did not accept his dismissal and sought to restore his position within the

<sup>70</sup> HC Deb 12 July 1917, vol. 95, col. 2234.

<sup>71</sup> Sir Edwin Montagu replaced Chamberlain as Secretary of State for India in July 1917. Sir Charles Monro replaced Beauchamp Duff as Commander-in-Chief in India in June 1917.

<sup>72</sup> 'Chamberlain Out of India Office', *The New York Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1917.

<sup>73</sup> As addressed in section one, testimony and statements collected by the commission were deemed by government officials as especially legitimate due to the commission's power to put witnesses under oath.

<sup>74</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for India', 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1917.

<sup>75</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for India', 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1917.



Indian Army by questioning the validity of evidence used against him during the Mesopotamia Commission.<sup>76</sup> He argued that the Secretary of State for India's decision to dismiss him had been—unlawfully—taken in response to the contents of the commission's preliminary report (which had been circulated to the India Office in March 1917) rather than in the legal process as a result of an Army Council hearing as announced in parliament.<sup>77</sup> Although Aylmer was not explicitly censured in the published Mesopotamia Commission report, he was named and criticized for his decision-making in the field. He recognized that this analysis would have also been included in the circulated preliminary report and would have been the justification for his dismissal in March.

In challenging his dismissal, he criticized the commission for posturing as a legal court. First, he emphasized the errors uncritically included in the report. He challenged the specificities of the criticism levied against him (specifically, the exact distance of a night march that he had ordered) and emphasized the inaccuracy and the legal inadmissibility of the evidence collected during the commission.<sup>78</sup> Second, he emphasized the commission's failure to let him defend himself or 'reply' to these 'representations' before they were published in the preliminary report.<sup>79</sup> He reminded the Secretary of State for War that the government had stated that no one would be dismissed until the Army Council had finished their own inquiry into each individual case: 'As far as I can judge the reasons for this decision were the original composition of the Commission and the unsatisfactory manner in which evidence had been taken.'<sup>80</sup> As his dismissal had been organized before an Army Council inquiry could take place, Aylmer believed that the commission had unjustly encouraged this decision and prompted a circumvention of the legal process of military dismissal.

However, it was not only the circulation of the preliminary Mesopotamia Commission report that had led to Aylmer's dismissal in March 1917. During this period the commissioners directly consulted with the India Office to discuss Aylmer's behaviour during the Mesopotamia Campaign and the issue of his return to lead the Tigris corps in India. Chelmsford, the Viceroy, telegraphed the India Office to ask for their opinion 'as the Mesopotamia Commission is now over', noting that he and the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief in India, Sir Charles Monro, would 'agree to a decision by [the] War Office based on evidence before Commission and opinions of latter'.<sup>81</sup> Extending into an additional—and unmandated—function, the commissioners wrote to Holderness at the India Office in March 1917 to provide their personal opinion on Aylmer, as requested by the Viceroy, based only upon the evidence they had received during the inquiry:

... it is not so easy for the Commissioners to form an opinion as to his fitness for re-employment. He was not known to any of them and no specific charges were made against him. But they formed the impression that he had seen his best days, and that viewing his want of success when in command of the operations of the Tigris Corps for the relief of Kut, they think it would be unwise to employ him in the field in a post suitable to his rank.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, as Aylmer had alleged in his letter, the Mesopotamia Commission had been fundamental to the decision taken to dismiss him, circumventing the Army Council.

As government officials transferred the responsibility of Aylmer's case to the Army Council following his first letter, they sought to distance themselves from their

<sup>76</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for War', September 1917.

<sup>77</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for War', September 1917.

<sup>78</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for India', 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1917.

<sup>79</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for War', September 1917.

<sup>80</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Aylmer letter to Secretary of State for War', September 1917.

<sup>81</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Telegram from Viceroy, Army Department, to India Office', 25<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

<sup>82</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Letter from Mesopotamia Commission to the Under Secretary of State for India', in response to letter No. 11350.

responsibility—or that of their predecessor—for his dismissal. The newly appointed Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, took a different approach to his forerunner, admitting that the government was at fault for Aylmer's situation and for his double punishment for a singular failure:

whether we call it punishment or not, the fact remains that it was his failure in Mesopotamia which lost him both commands. And the irony of it is that this officer who was not censured by the Commission has suffered more severely than some of those who were. That the decision was right there can be little doubt. But the way it was arrived at is open to criticism. The less we argue with Gen Aylmer the better ...<sup>83</sup>

Throughout autumn 1917, the India Office—embarrassed by the situation—replied to Aylmer that the Secretary of State for India 'had nothing to add' and that the final decision rested with the Army Council.<sup>84</sup> This response revealed, however, that the India Office recognized that the Army Council should have *always* been involved in this decision, but that they had reversed the process: rather than the official being allowed to continue in employment whilst the Army Council considered his case, Aylmer was dismissed until the Council made a decision to either reverse the original decision or confirm it. Eventually, Aylmer's dismissal was overturned by the Army Council due to lack of evidence and he quietly retired from the British Army in February 1919.<sup>85</sup>

Aylmer's case of technocratic deference to the commission's findings and analysis—despite its limited legal powers and procedures—was not an anomaly. Aylmer may have been able to negotiate a return to service within a year of his dismissal, but for other officials, such as Major Murphy, the damage to their reputation was more profound. Indeed, as we now show, it was not just the men named in the report like Aylmer who suffered reputational damage in the aftermath of the report's publication.<sup>86</sup> In the case of Murphy, the commission individualized his responsibility for the crisis and positioned him as a 'scapegoat' for the troops' suffering in Mesopotamia, rather than legitimizing a multi-causal narrative. Just as with Lumsden and Aylmer, Major-General George V. Kemball and Reverend Ronald J. B. Irwin were asked by the commission to provide statements and provide testimony. In their statements, both Kemball and Irwin named Major A. Murphy as a negligent medical officer in the field and responsible for causing harm to Allied troops on the frontlines. They emphasized his callousness and his complicity in the suffering—and, ultimately, deaths—of many the British and Indian soldiers as they waited for vital medical attention.<sup>87</sup> Having already worked in Indian military care for seventeen years by the 1916 Mesopotamia Campaign, Murphy was an experienced and well-respected leader within the Indian Army but these accusations were immediately accepted and legitimized by the commissioners. They deemed these statements to be credible and useful to explain the context of the chaos and mismanagement of the frontlines in Mesopotamia. But they also decided to keep Murphy anonymous in their published report, supposedly due to his lower level of responsibility in the field and with the hopes of preserving his public reputation. Kemball and Irwin's reports of neglect were published, attributing responsibility to an unnamed medical officer. However, his name was circulated internally as the officer implicated in the report, influencing his career and professional reputation—even if the general

<sup>83</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Montagu to Cox, handwritten note', 27<sup>th</sup> July 1917.

<sup>84</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18379, 'Letter from Cox, India Office, to Aylmer', 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1917.

<sup>85</sup> 'Obituary: Lieutenant-General Sir Fenton J Aylmer', *The Irish Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1935.

<sup>86</sup> Scholars have acknowledged the reputational damage of the report on these high-level men, especially Austen Chamberlain, who was forced to resign, and Beauchamp Duff, who killed himself in 1918. See P. Mangold, *What the British Did: Two Centuries in the Middle East* (London, 2016).

<sup>87</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, 'The Reply of Major Murphy, I. M. S., To the Charges Brought Against Him in The Course of The Proceedings Of The Vincent-Bingley Committee And The Mesopotamia Commission', 11<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

public and media were unaware. In the Vincent-Bingley report, Murphy's guilt had been essentially confirmed despite the scarcity of evidence against him other than Kemball's statement: 'We may say, however, that this officer was in our opinion very fortunate in being exonerated from blame.'<sup>88</sup>

The Mesopotamia Commission went far beyond the Vincent-Bingley Commission in interfering in Murphy's career, however. The commission provided the Army Council and the Secretary of State for India with new opportunities to investigate the charge and collect more 'evidence' against the officer. They framed their role in Murphy's case as exclusively investigatory, ostensibly excluding the commission from ruling on the specifics of military misconduct. An exchange of letters between Holderness and Duff revealed how the commissioners simultaneously interfered whilst claiming disengagement. In one letter, Duff asserted that the commissioners were detached from Murphy's case, communicating that the commission has decided that they would 'not undertake the responsibility of fully investigating the charges against the conduct of subordinate officers ...'.<sup>89</sup> However, their direct involvement in the escalation of Murphy's case demonstrated the authority and functional value of the commission for more than just the published report; it was policing its own witnesses, collecting evidence for disciplinary action, and seeking punitive resolutions to the Mesopotamia crisis.

Following receipt of Kemball and Irwin's statements in late 1916, the Mesopotamia Commissioners planned to escalate Murphy's case to the Army Council and notified Austen Chamberlain in the India Office. However, the evidence taken during the commission—although under oath—could not be accepted as legally admissible to the Army Council for court martial.<sup>90</sup> The Viceroy, Chelmsford, considered the options for the future of Murphy's case without the direct use of the commission statements. He stressed that the 'collection of material witnesses now scattered' would be particularly difficult after 18 months and 'it would in our opinion be impossible for any court to appreciate at their true value the facts which weighed with responsible military authorities on the spot at the time allegations were investigated'.<sup>91</sup> After discussing with the India Office, Chelmsford decided that for the case to proceed, Murphy would have to be given the right to respond to the accusations made against him, just as Aylmer had demanded. Although the legal technicality prevented any military tribunal from using the Mesopotamia Commission's statements as evidence, the state leadership still referred to and shared these statements (within internal communications) as if they were legal documents capable of supporting a formal process of dismissal or a criminal conviction. As Bonar Law communicated to the House of Commons in July 1917,

... witnesses are fully indemnified against any use of their evidence in any subsequent proceedings against them. Any proceedings against the persons concerned, therefore, have to be commenced *de novo*, and to be based on evidence given entirely independently of the Commission. To act by any method of summary jurisdiction would be to condemn men who had not been tried, and in case of a protest it would be impossible to refuse a court-martial.<sup>92</sup>

Montagu wrote to Chelmsford following the publication of the commission report to update him on the case which had yet to be resolved. Murphy's case ignited tense negotiations between the two departments as they navigated questions of individual responsibility in a military context and debated the legal powers of a public inquiry, hoping to resolve the

<sup>88</sup> BNA, 'Appendices to the Vincent Bingley report on the medical arrangements in Mesopotamia', August 1916, para. 149. [emphasis is authors' own].

<sup>89</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, 'Letter from Duff to Holderness', 13<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

<sup>90</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, 'Telegram from Viceroy, Army Dept to India Office Military Office', 26<sup>th</sup> June 1917.

<sup>91</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, 'Telegram from Viceroy, Army Dept to India Office Military Office', 26<sup>th</sup> June 1917.

<sup>92</sup> HC, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1917, 'Court of Inquiry Appointed', vol. 95, col. 1918.

issue without the Army Council and to keep the case within the Indian Government.<sup>93</sup> In late 1917, Montagu requested that Murphy submit an ‘explanation of the report to the charges made against him’ to aid Chelmsford in deciding if he should escalate the case to the Army Council. Efforts continued to circumvent the official legal process of the Army Council and to prioritize the commission’s findings in governmental decision-making.

On 11 December 1918, Murphy, with the assistance of state counsel, submitted his lengthy response from his frontline position in Burma as, unlike Aylmer, he had avoided immediate dismissal in 1917.<sup>94</sup> However, investigations into his misconduct during the campaign extended beyond the temporal confines of the commission *and* the First World War, dragging into 1919 and damaging Murphy’s personal and professional reputation. Murphy’s response emphasized the insubstantiality of the accusations made against him under oath, just as Aylmer attacked the credibility of the ‘evidence’ used against him. Annotating Kemball and Irwin’s statements against him, he argued that:

Had I been the “inhuman” monster that I have been painted there must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of witnesses to testify against me. There are only two ... In these circumstances, even without taking into consideration the facts which I have set out in my reply, I respectfully submit that it is inconceivable that during this one month of my long period of service I should have been guilty of the callousness and inhumanity which Major General Kemball and Mr Irwin have laid to my charge.<sup>95</sup>

Offering an alternative perspective on the frontlines, Murphy suggested instead that what the two officers had understood as cruel neglect was instead the result of a chaotic and highly under-resourced environment in war; his crime was to be under-resourced in bandages, medical staff, and medicine—the same structural issue that had been identified as the underlying failure by the Mesopotamia Commission report.<sup>96</sup>

In the India Office, the reaction to Murphy’s response letter was unanimously supportive. Despite the initial enthusiasm to escalate his case and to dismiss the Major, the India Office personnel and India Government officials galvanized in support of Murphy.<sup>97</sup> They believed that ‘Major Murphy cannot be held to blame’ for the appalling conditions on the ground in Mesopotamia, recognizing that he should not be made individually responsible for the medical shortages and failures in transport and urging that he should not be disciplined or dismissed.<sup>98</sup> By the end of December 1918, the India Office had formally advised that Montagu cease to investigate Murphy. However, no suggestions were made about any consequences for Irwin or Kemball, despite the widespread acceptance that the accusations against Murphy were false. This was not a truth- or justice-seeking inquiry, nor was it a formal investigation by the Army Council; the internal investigation into Murphy by the India Office was limited to the question of negligence and the potential harm of British and Indian Army soldiers as understood by officials based in London.

In February 1919, Montagu referred the India Office despatch to Major-General Percy Cox and some of his medical colleagues for ‘any remarks’ on the Murphy case.<sup>99</sup> Sir Richard Havelock Charles argued that Irwin’s statements to the Mesopotamia

<sup>93</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Letter from Montagu to Chelmsford in Council’, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917.

<sup>94</sup> His avoidance of dismissal was also likely why he was unable to threaten legal action against the state, unlike Aylmer, as he had not suffered material damage due to the circumvention of the Army Council in his case.

<sup>95</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘The Reply of Major Murphy, I. M. S., To The Charges Brought Against Him In The Course Of The Proceedings Of The Vincent-Bingley Committee And The Mesopotamia Commission’, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

<sup>96</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘The Reply of Major Murphy, I. M. S., To The Charges Brought Against Him In The Course Of The Proceedings Of The Vincent-Bingley Committee And The Mesopotamia Commission’, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

<sup>97</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Letter from India Government (Chelmsford) to Montagu’, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

<sup>98</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Letter from India Government (Chelmsford) to Montagu’, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1918.

<sup>99</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Minute note from Cox to Charles’, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1919.

Commission were ‘those of a man who amidst the terribleness of the conditions had “lost his head”’.<sup>100</sup> He also insisted that it would be wrong for an individual, such as Major Murphy, to be made responsible for the suffering on the frontlines in Mesopotamia. He believed that the blame should lay with those who decided to reduce the British Indian Army’s weapons and personnel *before* the First World War, especially the individual that he referred to as the ‘Financial Member’. He asked:

Is Major Murphy to be the sacrifice for the Financial Member who boasted that he had “bled the army white”? A gentleman who lives at his ease now in London. For the lives that were lost, for the awfulness of the conditions, for the frightfulness that upset General Kemball and Rev Irwin surely he is to blame ... that the Meso [sic] arrangements were so deficient in material and personnel, and not an officer who for 17 years had an unblemished career ...<sup>101</sup>

In a handwritten note in the margin of Charles’ letter, India Office official Edmund Barrow added: ‘The Financial Member who, if I may say so, [was] not terminated for the medical arrangements in Mesopotamia.’<sup>102</sup> This ‘Financial Member’ was likely Sir Guy Fleetwood Wilson, a financial specialist with the War Office and later a Financial Member of the Viceroy’s Council in India, working alongside the Viceroy, Chelmsford. Fleetwood Wilson had been published in *The Times* for his supposed brag at the end of his term in India: ‘Thank God. I’ve bled the Army white’, in relation to his decisions to cut expenditure, as suggested by Indian Military and Medical Services officials.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, despite rejecting the individualization of Murphy in the Mesopotamia Commission report, Charles insisted on Fleetwood Wilson as the responsible party for the frontline suffering. He suggested that Cox push Montagu to not only end the investigation into Murphy, but to pursue his complete exoneration: ‘Who will repay to [Murphy] his worries? He truly is the Financial Members’ sacrificée.’<sup>104</sup> Fleetwood thus became the embodiment of a particular economic rationality that served as a new—individualized—justification for the failings of the Indian Government during the First World War. Consequently, Cox wrote to Montagu on 3 March 1919 to not only support the India Office’s recommendation for Murphy to be retained by the Army, but to amplify Charles’ call for Murphy to be fully exonerated as a consequence of this investigation.<sup>105</sup> In addition to detailing his own experiences with the ill-resourced medical conditions on the ground during the conflict, Cox also repeated Charles’ arguments that Kemball’s evidence was little more than ‘hearsay’ that would ‘not be admissible before a Court-Martial’ and blamed Irwin’s lack of field experience for his horror in response to ‘the want of doctors and equipment’, thus making Irwin unable to credibly ‘locate the responsibility’ for the disorder and suffering in front of him.<sup>106</sup> Following receipt of Cox’s minute at the India Office, Barrow sent a short note to Montagu to second Cox’s suggestion that the government needed to go beyond a dismissal of Murphy’s case and help—publicly—rebuild his reputation with a statement to the press or as part of a speech in the House of Commons.<sup>107</sup>

However, Montagu was concerned that a public apology to Murphy would commit the India Office to endorsing the Major’s views of Kemball’s evidence, commenting that they need not ‘whitewash Major Murphy more thoroughly than is necessary’.<sup>108</sup> Montagu’s

<sup>100</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Charles letter to Cox’, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1919.

<sup>101</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Charles letter to Cox’, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1919.

<sup>102</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Charles letter to Cox’, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1919. [Charles’ own emphasis].

<sup>103</sup> Sehgal and Sehrawat, ‘Scandal in Mesopotamia’, 1426.

<sup>104</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Charles letter to Cox’, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1919.

<sup>105</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Percy Cox minute to Montagu’, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1919.

<sup>106</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Percy Cox minute to Montagu’, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1919.

<sup>107</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘EGB note on Percy Cox minute to Montagu’, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1919.

<sup>108</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Montagu cover note attached to draft despatch to the Government of India’, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1919.

suggestion that, despite his acceptance that Murphy *was* wrongly accused, the medical officer should remain ‘in play’ for any future investigations into the failures in Mesopotamia demonstrated the India Office’s preference for individualizing responsibility as a means of circumventing criticism of the state. Paradoxically, although for many, Fleetwood Wilson was *politically* responsible, this was deemed a sufficiently different type of complicity and he was thus largely protected from repercussions due to a culture of impunity towards political decision-makers and field-based violence. Barrow’s hopes for the India Office to publicly exonerate Murphy following three years of scrutiny were dashed against the political priority to preserve the available scapegoat, confirming that individual suspicion served an explicitly political purpose for the benefit of the state. Deciding to take the safe option to privately exonerate Murphy, Montagu wrote to Chelmsford to officially absolve Murphy on 10 April 1919, requesting that the India Office communicate this news directly to the Major.<sup>109</sup>

Once the Murphy-as-scapegoat approach was rejected by the India Office, British government officials sought to rebuild their understanding of blame for the failings on the ground and reframe the commission’s findings: if legalistic individualization could not explain the crisis, what could? Someone—or something—needed to be held responsible. Some government officials felt the same as Charles and emphasized that it was the formative, mercenary policies within the War Office—to limit numbers of medical staff and transport within the Indian Army—that created the conditions for the suffering. Relatedly, many others shifted back towards criticism of the Indian Government and its administration *during* the war (rather than focusing on London’s decisions to under-resource India *before* the war). This anti-India Government feeling was part of a wider conservative strategy to criticize the colonial administration and weaken the Anglo-Indian relationship during the First World War. As Manu Sehgal and Samiksha Sehrawat have argued, ‘the Mesopotamia Commission report’s attention to the Indian Finance Department was clearly linked to the outcry in the conservative British press about India’s failure to contribute adequately to the defence of the British empire’.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the economic limitations of the Indian government became, by the end of the First World War, a cause for scrutiny within government as right-wing politicians sought to place the blame for any failures on the frontline with the ill-resourced Indian Army and the government in charge of its expenditure. Sehgal and Sehrawat have emphasized the influence of the British press in impressing this narrative on the British public: ‘The Indian government’s failure to raise an internal war loan to meet the costs of the war was roundly criticized in the conservative British press. This reflected a wider shift in emphasis in British home front propaganda away from valorising the sacrifice of life to sacrificing resources ...’<sup>111</sup> This perception—held by the commissioners as well as the British right-wing press—promoted the idea that the Indian home-front should have provided the same quantity of resources and military personnel towards the British war effort as its other settler colonies had (Australia, Canada, etc.). However, the India Government faced internal security risks from frontier violence and nationalist groups<sup>112</sup>—as well as other significant socio-economic obstacles<sup>113</sup>—during the war, inhibiting the colonial administration from dedicating the Indian Army military materiel to the war in the same way as other allied parties. Despite these limitations, the Indian Government’s ‘contribution to the war, especially in the early phase, had been considerable’.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, as the India Office shifted away from criticizing Murphy as one of

<sup>109</sup> BL, IOR/L/MIL/7/18365, ‘Letter from Montagu to Chelmsford’, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1919.

<sup>110</sup> Sehgal and Sehrawat, ‘Scandal in Mesopotamia’, 1426.

<sup>111</sup> Sehgal and Sehrawat, ‘Scandal in Mesopotamia’, 1427.

<sup>112</sup> J. S. Galbraith, ‘No Man’s Child: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1916’, *The International History Review*, 6 (1984), 375.

<sup>113</sup> Kumar Bagchi, ‘Indian Economy and Society during World War One’, *Social Scientist*, 42 (2014), 5–27.

<sup>114</sup> Sehgal and Sehrawat, ‘Scandal in Mesopotamia’, 1429.

the key individuals responsible for the Mesopotamia emergency, post-war government officials' attention refocused on the pre-war economic decision-makers and the India Government as those responsible for the military failures in Mesopotamia in early 1916, demonstrating how national ideas of responsibility and blame for military failures in war evolved in tandem with contemporary political interests.

## Conclusion

Horsley's 'Voice from the Dead' cast a long shadow over public inquiries into war and conflict. Although his concerns were regarding the Vincent-Bingley Commission, his criticisms of individual blame and commission credibility remained just as pertinent for the Mesopotamia Commission. We have assessed the commission for its own political character, showing how the commission shaped—and was shaped by—British officials' strategic demands *and* fears of imperial decline and changing priorities during the First World War. Although ostensibly impartial, the commissioners' methodological preferences and efforts to interfere beyond the confines of the commission informed narratives of British military failures and impacted upon officials' professional reputations. By taking an individualistic approach to the crisis, as Horsley feared, the commissioners perpetuated the idea that 'bad apples' from the frontlines could be eliminated from the British military, thus ensuring that the standards of British warfare would be upheld—without much reflection on whether those standards of 'good' statecraft were complicit in the failings. For the commissioners, the crisis was easier to make sense of in isolation as they focused on individual responsibility, field-based recklessness, and bureaucratic messiness between different British military departments and the Indian Government leadership. The failure on the ground was thus narrativized as outlier event; an anomalous scandal for its unexpected and unreasonable effect on the British and Indian troops, rather than for its symptomatic quality or systemic nature.

Horsley's anxieties also extend a century into more recent inquiries on Britain's role in the Middle East. On the face of it, public inquiries are perceived as more sophisticated, reflective, and equitable in the knowledge that they produce. It can also be argued that present-day inquiries—including those without legal powers—have paid much more attention to systemic or structural pathologies that contributed to wartime fiascos and scandals. In other respects, however, the Mesopotamia Commission's criticism of Lumsden for 'failing to rise to the occasion' bears resemblance to the recent Iraq 'Chilcot' Inquiry's criticism of the lack of 'ground truth' during post-conflict operations in Iraq, and the critique of the India Government's planning and use of resources echoes in Chilcot's criticism of Whitehall's 'lack of preparation' and 'idealism' in its post-war plans.<sup>115</sup> These twenty-first-century criticisms do not share the Mesopotamia Commission's focus on individuals, but they nonetheless share features of methodological individualism: that is, they invite a critique of individuals' and organizations' techniques in the *conduct* of strategy, rather than a reflection or interrogation of the strategy itself.<sup>116</sup> Core features of British grand strategy were not merely withheld from scrutiny by the inquiry in 1917, the commission was designed to re-establish trust in them—as well as the British state's operational ability to wage war. What we have shown, by revealing the inner workings of the Mesopotamia Commission for the first time, is that such conclusions arise from engrained and selective methodological processes—not whitewash *or* objectivity—and such processes bolster state power and legitimize the state's monopoly on violence. Without the scrutiny of such

<sup>115</sup> Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary* (London), 134–35.

<sup>116</sup> O. Thomas, 'Good Faith and (dis) Honest Mistakes? Learning from Britain's Iraq War Inquiry', *Politics*, 37 (2017), 371–85; G. Rangwala, 'Locating Political Responsibility for War: the Iraq Inquiries, 2003–2016', *Critical Military Studies* (forthcoming).

instruments' methodological processes, British wartime failures will continue to be visited by Horsley's ghost.

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