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Lord Kitchener's Appointment as Secretary of State for War in 1914

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ABSTRACT

Lord Kitchener was a popular choice as Britain's Secretary for War in 1914, but many facts about his selection are contested, including why he was recalled to London and who did most to urge the appointment. While some have argued that the decision was forced on the Liberal government by the Conservative opposition and the Press, this interpretation was dismissed as a 'silly figment' by the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith. This article provides a detailed consideration of the appointment, considers possible reasons for Asquith's action, seeks to resolve ambiguities in the evidence, but also raises doubts about widely-accepted details.

Introduction

Lord Kitchener was a popular choice when appointed Secretary of State for War by the Liberal Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, in 1914. True, the Field-Marshal had little recent knowledge of Britain, having spent several years in India before becoming Consul-General in Egypt in 1911, but he had planned successful campaigns, was physically courageous, had carried out a major reform of the Indian army and won a reputation for administrative efficiency. Yet, George Cassar, author of the fullest existing account of the appointment, admitted that the details of how it came about 'are not absolutely clear.'¹ The rapid pace of events in early August 1914 meant that many details went unrecorded, while later criticism of Kitchener's wartime role may have led some of those involved to avoid commenting on his appointment in their memoirs. Many facts are contested, from why Kitchener was recalled to London, to precisely when he was offered the War Office. It has been argued that Asquith initially intended to put his friend Lord Haldane in the post² and that 'Haldane was keen to

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¹George Cassar, *Kitchener*, (London: Kimber, 1977), p. 176.

²Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 31.

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keep Kitchener out of the Cabinet...³ One account believes Haldane was formally appointed Secretary for War, albeit for a few days.⁴ Lord Beaverbrook, a Conservative M.P at the time, asserted that Kitchener's 'appointment was made in deference both to the overwhelming pressure of public opinion and of the Press, and to the views of the Opposition'⁵, echoing Wickham Steed, foreign editor of *The Times*, who believed it 'was due in large measure to the public insistence of Lord Northcliffe', the newspaper's owner.⁶ Yet, in stark contrast to these interpretations, Asquith later wrote, 'I had talked over the matter with... Haldane, who agreed... it was of the highest importance to persuade Kitchener to accept the seals of the War Office... The legend that his nomination was forced upon a... reluctant government by... the Press is... a silly figment.'⁷ This article provides a detailed consideration of Kitchener's appointment, considers possible reasons for Asquith's choice, seeks to resolve the many ambiguities in the evidence, but also raises doubts about some widely-accepted details.

Kitchener Recalled

On 23 July 1914, the European situation became deeply worrying, when Austria-Hungary made humiliating demands on its neighbour Serbia following the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. It was soon evident Germany would back Austria, while Russia – allied to France and an entente partner of Britain – would support Serbia. In London, on 29 July, the Cabinet agreed that the so-called 'precautionary stage' for hostilities had arrived, which included orders for any officials who were on leave to return to their posts, Kitchener, at home since 23 June, among them.⁸ Much of the accepted story of how he was recalled to London, having already set out for Cairo, was provided by his Oriental Secretary, Ronald Storrs, whose memoirs form the basis of several accounts.⁹ There can be no doubt Storrs was a well-placed observer, since he continued to act as Secretary during Kitchener's visit home. Storrs' account also has local colour and drama, making it attractive to biographers. He says he was initially told that Kitchener and his party would sail on 3 August; but on 31 July,

³Trevor Royle, *The Kitchener Enigma*, (London: History Press, 1985), p. 230.

⁴C.E. Callwell, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Volume I*, (London: Cassell, 1927), p. 157.

⁵Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, (London: Collins, 1960), p. 170.

⁶Henry Wickham Steed, *Through Thirty Years, 1892-1922, Volume II*, (London: Heinemann, 1924), p. 33.

⁷H. H. Asquith, *The Genesis of the War*, (London: Cassell, 1923), p. 219.

⁸Asquith to the King, 30 July, J.A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Volume II*, (London: Hutchinson, 1932), p. 81.

⁹George Cassar, *Kitchener's War*, (Washington: Potomac, 2004), p. 20; John Pollock, *Kitchener*, (London: Constable, 1998), pp. 372-3; Royle, *Enigma*, p. 229. Brad Faught's *Kitchener: hero and anti-hero*, (London: Tauris, 2016), pp. 190-91, discusses the appointment only briefly.

Colonel Oswald Fitzgerald, Kitchener's Military Secretary, warned there might be delays. On 3 August, Storrs suddenly received a telegram saying Kitchener was, after all, departing on the 1 p.m. Channel crossing. Hastily leaving his parent's house in Rochester, Storrs reached Dover at 11.55:

We... found the boat there and Kitchener striding alone up and down the deck. "Tell the Captain to start", he kept saying. I reminded him of the boat-train [due from London], but he fretted, dreading to be held back at the last moment in an advisory capacity... After fifteen difficult minutes the boat-train came in, bearing Fitzgerald, with a message from the Prime Minister instructing Kitchener to remain.¹⁰

Elements of Storrs' tale circulated before he published his memoirs. *The Standard* and *Daily Herald* were among newspapers which reported, on 4 August, that Kitchener 'motored from Broome Park [his country house near Canterbury] to Dover... and embarked on a Calais steamer...', while Lady Hamilton (wife of General Sir Ian Hamilton) wrote of him being 'dragged off his steamer on his way to Egypt.'¹¹ Like Storrs, the 1920 official biography said Kitchener, having travelled to Dover from Broome, urged the ferry captain to depart without awaiting the boat-train.¹² Yet, there are good reasons for judging Storrs' reminiscences to be unreliable. Even a cursory reading reveals inaccuracies in his account, including misdating the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by almost a month. Other details seem, at best, unlikely. Was Storrs really ignorant of the departure time until mere hours beforehand? Did Kitchener really expect the ferry to sail without awaiting the boat train? Storrs clearly manipulates evidence, not least to suggest Kitchener was reluctant to become Secretary for War: when explaining why the Field Marshal had to quit London early, he does not mention the 'precautionary period', but instead claims, vaguely, that Kitchener was 'anxious to avoid strange political adventures.'¹³ Storrs' account also flies in the face of better, alternative evidence.

Kitchener's appointment diary is unhelpful at this point. It sketches his planned schedule following his recall to Egypt but was not updated to reflect actual events.¹⁴ More useful is newspaper evidence that exposes the absurdity of Storrs' claim of uncertainty about the return date to Egypt. The date was public knowledge: on 2 August, for example, the *Daily Telegraph* reported the plans for Kitchener to begin his

¹⁰Ronald Storrs, *Orientations*, (London: Ivor Nicholson, 1937), pp. 143-46.

¹¹King's College, London, 20/1/2, Lady Hamilton Diary, 5 August.

¹²George Arthur, *Life of Lord Kitchener: Volume III*, (London: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 2-3.

¹³Storrs, *Orientations*, p. 145.

¹⁴The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) PRO30/57/116, Kitchener's engagement diary.

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journey on Monday, 3 August, travelling via Paris, Marseilles, then ship across the Mediterranean. On 4 August, the same newspaper recorded that, the previous day, Kitchener had arrived in Dover on 'the first boat-train from London... [and] embarked on the one o'clock boat for Calais when he was recalled by telegram...' This suggests that, rather than arriving from Broome and pestering the captain to depart before the boat-train arrived, Kitchener travelled from London on that very train. It also fits the evidence of newspaper editor J.A. Spender, who says his wife 'had seen Kitchener in the act of departing from Victoria Station.'¹⁵

The most telling evidence against Storrs comes from official records. A Foreign Office minute reveals that on 31 July it was agreed Kitchener and his party would leave for Paris on 3 August.¹⁶ At 1.30 a.m. on 3 August, a message was sent to the British Embassy in Paris, saying a 'special train is now waiting at Calais for Lord Kitchener... He proposes to start from Victoria [station] 11 a.m Monday.' But at 11 a.m., the very time Kitchener was scheduled to leave, the Office sent another telegram to Paris stating, 'Kitchener's journey through France definitely abandoned as train is forbidden to leave.'¹⁷ This confirms a report, in a late edition of *The Times* of 3 August, that Kitchener's departure was postponed because 'Events have moved so rapidly that his journey across France... is no longer practicable.' It added, 'A different route may be taken later in the week, unless, indeed, Lord Kitchener's services should be required in the meantime for purposes other than those originally intended.'

Rather than Kitchener reaching the ferry from Broome and bidding its captain to leave, then, the truth was more mundane: the 'precautionary period' was declared on 29 July; plans were fixed for Kitchener to leave England; his party left Victoria Station at 11, as planned, and arrived in time for the 1 p.m. crossing; but by then it was impossible to travel across France because, as one of Kitchener's friends noted, French authorities 'could not let his special train interfere with their mobilization.'¹⁸ Biographers may have been misled into believing Storrs' account by the wording of a letter from Asquith to Kitchener later in the day, saying, 'I was very sorry to interrupt your journey to-day, and I fear caused you inconvenience. But with matters in their present critical position, I was anxious that you should not get beyond the reach of personal consultation and assistance.'¹⁹ The apologetic wording raises the possibility, either that Asquith wished to prevent Kitchener going from Dover to Broome Park, or that Downing Street initially recalled him before being informed he would not, in

¹⁵J.A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics, Volume II*, (London: Cassell, 1927), p. 62.

¹⁶TNA FO371/1968/35050, Clarke minute, draft telegram, 31 July; FO371/1968/35095, Bertie to Grey, 31 July.

¹⁷TNA FO371/1968/35571, undated draft telegrams 74 and 308.

¹⁸Leo Amery, *My Political Life, Vol. II*, (London, 1953), p. 22.

¹⁹TNA PRO30/57/76, Asquith to Kitchener, 3 August.

any case, be able to travel across France. So, it is important to ask why Asquith recalled him to London, including whether he was already seen as the next Secretary for War.

The Candidates

The post of Secretary for War has been described as 'practically vacant' in July 1914.²⁰ Asquith had himself taken it up following the resignation, on 31 March, of the incumbent, Jack Seely, during the Curragh incident, after he made promises to disaffected army officers that ought to have been referred to the Cabinet.²¹ Since Asquith remained busy as Prime Minister, the arrangement caused problems at the War Office (WO). Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations, complained in April, 'Asquith sent word to say he would not be in War Office till next week, so all our superior work is at a standstill. He has done practically nothing since he has been S. of S....'²² In June, *The Times*' military correspondent, Charles Repington visited the WO and learnt Asquith 'is rarely there, does nothing, and does it extremely well.'²³ Asquith later admitted, 'It was impossible for me, when war was once declared, any longer to combine the duties of the War Office with those of Prime Minister...'²⁴

One possible solution was to recall Seely, who had a military background. In fact, he may have been offered it, though the evidence is ambiguous. 'Jack' Pease, the Education Minister, recorded a conversation on 2 August when Asquith 'told me he proposed to relieve himself of the position of War Minister (? Seely to be reinstated?)'²⁵ The two question marks suggest grave doubts about such a move, but Seely also later told Sir George Riddell, chair of the *News of the World*, that 'the Prime Minister had offered him one of the... seats in the Cabinet, which he had declined...'²⁶ One piece of evidence which speaks against Asquith having offered Seely the War Office, however, is his remark in a letter of 5 August that, in handing over the post, he wished to avoid 'a repetition of the Arch-Colonel fiasco', a reference to Seely's resignation over the Curragh incident²⁷ ('Arch-Colonel' being Asquith's nickname for Seely, which itself

²⁰Reginald Esher, *The Tragedy of Lord Kitchener*, (London: John Murray, 1921), p.24.

²¹See Ian Beckett, *The Army and the Curragh Incident*, (London: Army Records Society, 1986).

²²Callwell, *Wilson, Vol 1*, pp. 146-47.

²³A.J.A. Morris, ed., *The Letters of Charles à Court Repington*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 224.

²⁴Asquith, *Genesis*, p. 219.

²⁵K.M. Wilson, ed., 'The Cabinet Diary of J.A. Pease, 24 July-5 August 1914', *Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (1983), p. 9.

²⁶*Lord Riddell's War Diary*, (London: Ivor Nicholson, 1933), pp. 9-10.

²⁷Michael and Eleanor Brock, eds., *H.H. Asquith letters to Venetia Stanley*, (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 157.

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may have been a mocking reference to the fact that he insisted on being referred to as Colonel even though he only held this rank in the Yeomanry, not the regular army).

The other obvious candidate for the post was Haldane, already a highly successful Secretary for War in 1905-12 and creator of the Territorial Force of reserve troops²⁸, but now Lord Chancellor. Before war was declared, he was already involved in urging practical preparations on the Prime Minister. Haldane later recalled that, on 2 August, 'I said to the Prime Minister... he had better write a letter entrusting to me the business of going to the War Office and in his name mobilising my old organisation.' Asquith agreed, and Haldane arrived at the WO on 3 August, at 11 a.m. – just as Kitchener's staff left Victoria Station for Dover – to order mobilisation. Haldane adds that Asquith asked him, during the afternoon, 'to summon a War Council, and to select those who should attend.'²⁹ If Haldane's account is accurate, this request was only made *after* the decision to recall Kitchener to London, so he cannot have been recalled *in order* to attend the Council. But other sources suggest Asquith recalled Kitchener to London specifically so that he could be there,³⁰ an argument supported by the 3 August letter's emphasis on not allowing him to 'get beyond the reach of personal consultation and assistance.'

On 3 August, Asquith told his confidante Venetia Stanley, 'After tomorrow Haldane is going to help me every day at the WO and we have kept back Kitchener in case of need.'³¹ The term 'help me' hardly suggests Haldane was about to be made Secretary for War on a permanent basis and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, may have misremembered when he wrote, 'Asquith's first thought was naturally to send Haldane back to the War Office.'³² Then again, Haldane took his new duties seriously, informing his mother, on 4 August, 'I have taken over the War Office. I finish all my law cases today & from tomorrow devote myself to my old office although I remain [Lord] Chancellor.'³³ As to Kitchener, Haldane told his sister, 'There is much to be said for Asquith & myself handing over to Kitchener as War Secy. The public would be comforted, but I doubt whether the soldiers would. They know what they want and like working with me.'³⁴ Haldane was justified in believing he had support among the

²⁸See Edward Spiers, *Haldane: an army reformer*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

²⁹Lord Haldane, *Autobiography*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1929), pp. 275-7.

³⁰Spender and Asquith, *Asquith, II*, p. 105; Violet Bonham Carter, *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him*, (London: Collins, 1965), p. 316.

³¹Brocks, *Letters*, p. 148.

³²Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, Volume II*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), pp. 67-8.

³³National Library of Scotland (hereinafter NLS) Richard Haldane papers, MS. 5992, letter to his mother, 4 August.

³⁴Haldane papers, MS.6012, letter to sister, 4 August.

generals. Lord Nicholson, a former Chief of the Imperial General Staff, told him, 'I feel strongly that you ought to go back to the War Office, though you can ill be spared from your present high appointment...'³⁵ Douglas Haig, similarly wrote, 'I hear that you have returned to the War Office. I hope that you will stay there. There is no-one who can in this crisis do for us there what you can do.'³⁶ Later evidence suggests Haldane had plans to reform the WO: in 1917, he told Haig, 'If I had had my way, you would have taken the place at the head of a real great Headquarters Staff in London on the 4th August 1914. But with Kitchener, who knew nothing of these things, this was impossible.'³⁷

Haldane's attitude towards Kitchener is a complicated question. His letter to his sister, mentioned above, suggests he saw himself as a better candidate than the Field Marshal. In a 31 July conversation, Haldane had already expressed doubts about any War Office role for Kitchener, although this was partly because Haldane felt the Field Marshal's services were still needed in Egypt.³⁸ A confused account in Lady Hamilton's diary even has Haldane saying, 'Rather than that he should be Secretary of State for War... I will take it on myself', treatment that supposedly left Kitchener 'raging and fuming.'³⁹ But, the official biography of Haldane – by another of his supporters among the military, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice – reproduces a letter, evidently (from its opening remarks) written late on 3 August, telling Asquith:

The proclamation goes out tomorrow and Wednesday is the first day of mobilisation... I am willing, if you wish it, to stay on in my old office, and some of my soldier friends have been urging this upon me. In my opinion you should make Kitchener your War Minister. He commands a degree of public confidence which no one else would bring to the post.⁴⁰

Frustratingly, this letter is now missing from Haldane's private papers, but it is supported by another contemporary letter, which he wrote to his mother:

I think myself that if... the Prime Minister were to resign and appoint Lord Kitchener public confidence would be increased, & I am going to recommend

³⁵Haldane papers, MS.5910, Nicholson to Haldane, 3 August.

³⁶Frederick Maurice, *Haldane, Vol. 1*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970), p.356.

³⁷Robert Blake, ed., *The Private Letters of Douglas Haig* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 188.

³⁸British Library, Ashley MS. 5738, Edmund Gosse, 'What I saw and heard, July-August 1914'.

³⁹Hamilton diary, 5 August.

⁴⁰Maurice, *Haldane, Vol. 1*, p.356.

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this. Whether it will be done I do not know, but I shall go on doing his work of War Minister till he comes, if he does come...⁴¹

This letter, however, is dated 5 August; so he may not have backed Kitchener quite as early as Maurice asserts. But in her diary, Elizabeth Haldane gave a plausible reason why her brother favoured Kitchener, saying, 'it required a soldier to override soldier's decisions & also K's appt. would carry great weight in the country.'⁴²

In the days following Kitchener's appointment, Haldane continued to insist he had only intended to manage the WO for a short time: 'It was impossible to justify the Prime Minister remaining at the War Office & the Ld Chancellor doing his work in such a crisis. I saw that clearly &... pressed for Lord K. as the best change in the public interest & Asquith agreed.'⁴³ On 9 August, during an evening walk with Sir Almeric Fitzroy, Clerk to the Privy Council, 'Haldane said that his offers of assistance to Asquith at the War Office were limited to the outbreak of war, when he urged the appointment of Kitchener.'⁴⁴ Such evidence supports a later statement by Asquith, after newspapers accused Haldane of wanting the WO for himself in August 1914:

There is not a word of truth in this silly story. I was myself at the time Secretary of State and Lord Haldane was good enough to assist me for a few days at the Office, to cope with the overwhelming pressure. He was from the first moment a strong advocate of Lord Kitchener's appointment.⁴⁵

Important, previously overlooked evidence that Haldane only saw himself as a temporary stand-in at the WO, comes from an account left by the Librarian of the House of Lords, Edmund Gosse, who met him in the late afternoon of 3 August. Here Haldane told Gosse that Asquith *had* offered to make him Secretary for War; but Haldane had replied to the Prime Minister, 'No, I will go through the work... in your name, but you must continue for the present to be Minister for War. Later on you may wish to make changes, and perhaps have a soldier at the War Office...'⁴⁶ Despite indications, then, that Haldane believed himself competent to run the WO, strong evidence suggests he soon realised Kitchener was the better candidate. Also,

⁴¹Haldane papers, MS.5992, letter to his mother, 5 August.

⁴²NLS, Elizabeth Haldane papers, Mss.20240, diary, 8 August.

⁴³Haldane papers, MS.5992, letter to his mother, 6 August.

⁴⁴Almeric Fitzroy, *Memoirs, Vol. II*, (Hutchinson, 1925), 564; see also Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie eds., *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol.3*, (London: Virago, 1984), p. 216.

⁴⁵Asquith to Lincolnshire, 1 July 1915, in Maurice, *Haldane, Vol. II*, p. 6.

⁴⁶Gosse, 'What I saw'.

significantly, and despite claims to the contrary in some sources, Asquith never promised Haldane the post on a permanent basis.

The Press

The idea of a Kitchener appointment was far from novel in 1914. The former Liberal premier, Lord Rosebery, had occasionally suggested Kitchener as Secretary for War.⁴⁷ The Field Marshal himself even mulled over the possibility. His friend Sir Henry Rawlinson relates that, around New Year 1910, Kitchener said he was doubtful about becoming Secretary of War unless he could act in a non-party capacity, with the support of the Opposition, and carry through reforms of his own choosing.⁴⁸ In the 1914 crisis, the issue was first publicly raised on 3 August, in *The Times*, where Charles Repington argued:

the immediate nomination of a Secretary for War other than the Prime Minister, whose time is fully occupied with other important affairs, is indispensable in the interests of defence. Lord Kitchener is at home, and his selection for this onerous and important post would meet with warm public approval.

Repington, a former soldier, was a well-known and independent-minded figure. True, as the son of a Conservative MP, he had little liking for Liberal radicals, but he was no enemy of Haldane, praising the latter for supporting the Anglo-French *entente cordiale*.⁴⁹ According to Geoffrey Robinson who, as editor, approved the idea of Kitchener's appointment, it came to Repington on mere impulse.⁵⁰ Repington himself adds that, after he had recommended as the new Secretary for War, 'Lord K. sent Sir Henry Rawlinson to see me and find out what political game was behind my suggestion. I told him... I had made the suggestion in the public interest without any prompting from anybody.'⁵¹ But this was not the first time Repington had recommended Kitchener, for whose abilities he had enormous respect. In *The Observer* in April 1910, he had said, 'Kitchener should be Secretary for War when Mr. Haldane terminates his great administration'.⁵²

⁴⁷Lord Crewe, *Lord Rosebery, Volume II*, (London: John Murray, 1931), p.580.

⁴⁸Frederick Maurice, *The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent*, (London: Cassell, 1928), pp. 95-96.

⁴⁹Charles Repington, *The First World War, Volume I*, (London: Constable, 1920), pp. 12 and 286.

⁵⁰*The History of The Times, 1912-20*, (London: The Times, 1952), p. 217.

⁵¹Repington, *War, Vol. I*, p. 20.

⁵²A.J.A. Morris, *Reporting the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 42; *The Observer*, 24 April 1910.

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Repington's proposal sparked a general movement around Fleet Street on 3 August. J. A. Spender, editor of the pro-government *Westminster Gazette*, later recalled a series of telephone calls from about 10 a.m.:

One after another, different voices repeated the same tale – that Kitchener was going, that he must be stopped... the voices were those of brother editors... saying in unison that, if by evening it was found that Kitchener was gone, there would to-morrow be such an uproar against the government as had not been known in our time. I was begged to convey this to the proper quarter...

Spender wrote to his friend Reginald McKenna, the Home Secretary, who was in a Cabinet meeting, asking him to pass the word to Asquith. But Spender admits, 'what effect it had, if any, I don't know' and there is no evidence to suggest the Prime Minister acted on the message. As to events over the next few days, Spender insightfully adds, 'It was one thing to use Kitchener's services and *quite another to make him Secretary for War* [italics added], and I doubt very much whether this appointment would have been made but for the extraordinary agitation that was then rising against Haldane.'⁵³

The campaign in the right-wing Press against Haldane only really became serious on 5 August, however. His official biographer felt the 'clamour' was 'led by the *Daily Express*.'⁵⁴ This newspaper's remark, 'This is no time for elderly lawyers with German sympathies to play at soldiers', was the most wounding point made against Haldane and more than one Kitchener biography quotes it.⁵⁵ *The Times* probably carried more weight than the down-market *Express*, however. Northcliffe 'ordered a sharp attack on Haldane...' and his staff carried out the instruction although, according to the newspaper's official history, 'the Editor regarded it with distaste.'⁵⁶ On the 5th, an editorial headed 'Lord Haldane or Lord Kitchener' made 'an emphatic protest' against the idea the former could be appointed, partly because Kitchener possessed 'the kind of genius which shines best in war', but also because Haldane had been 'constantly strenuous in his efforts to promote Anglo-German friendship' and his appointment 'might be seriously misconceived by France.' The *Daily Mail*, also owned by Northcliffe, was cruder, declaring 'The Nation calls for Lord Kitchener' and even asking, 'Is Lord Haldane delaying war preparations?'

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to see a united Press campaign to this effect. Some newspapers preferred to focus positively, on support for the Field Marshal, rather than

⁵³Spender, *Life*, pp. 62-63.

⁵⁴Maurice, *Haldane, Vol. I*, p. 357.

⁵⁵Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 175; Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, p. 31.

⁵⁶*History of The Times, 1912-20*, p. 217; Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, (London: Cassell, 1959), pp. 464-5.

negatively, on criticisms of Haldane. *The Globe*, for example, favoured Kitchener but felt, 'both men, in their own spheres, are extremely able. Let us make use of both.' And Haldane had his supporters among the Liberal-leaning Press. The *Manchester Guardian*, which thought Kitchener might be appointed commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the continent, believed, 'no War Minister of modern times has more completely had the confidence of the army... than Lord Haldane', and it was 'natural' he should 'go in to assist the Prime Minister...' One leading provincial newspaper, the Liberal *Sheffield Independent*, even complained of a 'concerted effort to hustle Lord Kitchener into the office of Secretary for War', while the *Newcastle Journal* suggested a compromise might emerge, with Asquith remaining Secretary for War, Haldane in assistance and Kitchener having 'the practical direction of affairs at the War Office.' True, there was widespread satisfaction in the newspapers of 6 August, after Kitchener's appointment was announced. Even the *Manchester Guardian* said this would 'give the highest gratification to the mass of English people and to our allies on the Continent' But *The Times* felt compelled, now, to thank Haldane for 'the public service he undoubtedly rendered in organizing the Territorial Forces.'

The Opposition

Many Conservatives, too, backed Kitchener and some, at least, strongly opposed Haldane. As Beaverbrook noted, the party came to see Kitchener's appointment as 'largely forced on the Premier by the Tory agitation...'⁵⁷ A former Chief Whip, the Earl of Crawford, recorded on 4 August, that in the Carlton Club, 'Much fear is expressed lest Haldane may return to the War Office.'⁵⁸ Conservatives leaders discussed Kitchener early on 3 August, during a meeting between party leader Andrew Bonar Law, former premier Arthur Balfour, the Leader in the Lords, Lord Lansdowne, and former a Chancellor of the Exchequer, Austen Chamberlain. Chamberlain's official biographer writes, 'Austen at this meeting... seems to have made the first suggestion that Lord Kitchener... might be appointed Secretary of State for War.' But Chamberlain himself throws this account into doubt on two key points. First, he says he got the idea from Sir Percy Girouard, a railway engineer who worked with Kitchener in the Boer War. Second, rather than specifically urging that he become Secretary for War, he only suggested the Field Marshal, 'might well be kept and used at the War Office.' Chamberlain adds that, after the meeting of Conservative leaders, 'Balfour sent an immediate note to Winston [Churchill], then at the Cabinet, asking if

⁵⁷Beaverbrook, *Politicians*, pp. 170-71.

⁵⁸John Vincent, ed., *The Crawford Papers: the journals of David Lindsay*, (Manchester: University Press, 1984), p. 340.

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it had occurred to the Prime Minister that Kitchener might be more useful in organization at the War Office...⁵⁹

So, the Conservative leaders may *not* specifically have suggested Kitchener should be Secretary for War – merely that he would be ‘useful’ in some capacity at the War Office.⁶⁰ Furthermore, it is again unclear whether the Conservative message, sent via Churchill (acting as a conduit between government and opposition at this point), led Asquith to request Kitchener’s return to London. The Conservative meeting only began at 11 and the decision to contact Churchill was evidently taken some afterwards, but Asquith was chairing a Cabinet meeting from 11 a.m. and had already, perhaps, received Spender’s message about newspaper editors’ views. It is also odd, given subsequent claims that they had done most to force Kitchener’s appointment, that the Conservative leaders did not follow up their initial foray with any formal approach to Asquith. Balfour and Lansdowne had separate, lengthy meetings with Haldane on 4 August, but there is no indication in the very full records of these meetings that they even touched upon Kitchener’s position.⁶¹

A group of Conservative backbenchers also supported the Field Marshal. One was Lord Lovat, a hero of the Boer War; another Leo Amery, the future Cabinet minister. Amery claims to have urged Lovat and a more prominent Conservative, Lord Milner, to see Kitchener on 4 August, where they found him in ‘a thoroughly bewildered and disgruntled frame of mind’, having been, ‘literally hauled out of his cabin on the steamer’ and given ‘a note from Asquith to say that the Government would be glad of his advice, but with no other indication of any specific purpose for which he might be wanted.’ Keen to force a decision, Milner and Lovat ‘pushed him into a taxi... to tell Asquith that it was urgent that he should go back to Egypt at once unless the government had other work for him.’⁶² Milner’s diary provides a specific timeline for these events: he went to the Lords about 4.30, meeting Amery and Lovat in the lobby;

⁵⁹Austen Chamberlain, *Down the Years*, (London: Cassell, 1935), pp. 104-05; Birmingham University Library, Austen Chamberlain papers, AC14/2/5-6, Girouard to Chamberlain, and reply, 9-10 December 1929.

⁶⁰But Lord Selborne, a former Cabinet minister, believed Balfour ‘is trying to get Asquith to appoint K. Minister of War...’Bodleian Library, Oxford, Selborne Papers, Box 102, Lord to Lady Selborne, 4 August.

⁶¹Blanche Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour, Volume II, 1906-30*, (London: Hutchinson, undated) pp. 86-87; British Library, Bowood Papers, uncatalogued file, ‘Various papers, 1912-19’, memorandum, 4 August.

⁶²Amery, *Political Life*, II, 22; and see Amery to Maxse, 14 May 1917, quoted in A.M. Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics: a study of Lord Milner*, (London: Anthony Blond, 1964), p. 241.

they then arranged to see Kitchener at 6.30, then persuaded him to see Asquith.⁶³ This dovetails with evidence from *The Times* of 5 August, which says Kitchener was seen visiting Downing Street between 7 and 8 p.m. the previous evening. But, as will become apparent below, Asquith may not have been surprised to see Kitchener at this point; Milner and Lovat may simply have persuaded him to attend a meeting which had already been arranged. Also, Kitchener cannot have spent long with the Prime Minister: *The Times* reports that he was only one of several important figures entering Downing Street around that time, including three Cabinet ministers – Colonial Secretary Lewis Harcourt, Grey and Churchill. The last also claims to have had an influence over Kitchener's appointment.

Churchill and Asquith

Churchill carried special weight on defence matters at this point. Not only was he First Lord of the Admiralty, but he had military experience, including fighting under Kitchener at Omdurman in 1898. Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, remembered that, as the war began, with regard to 'military or naval movements... so far as there was any civilian consultation it was confined to the Prime Minister... Churchill, and occasionally Lord Haldane and Sir Edward Grey.'⁶⁴ Haldane says the First Lord 'was much with Kitchener as war approached and supported his appointment to the WO.'⁶⁵ On the morning of 3 August, Churchill, according to his official biographer (based on a contemporary note, which seems to have gone missing from the Churchill archive) saw Asquith and asked 'whether he would consider the appointment of Lord Kitchener.' Churchill added, 'I could see by Mr. Asquith's reception of my remarks that his mind was moving or had already moved along the same path.' But the comment that follows telescopes events and shows this note must have been written some time later: 'Action was taken the same day: the Field-Marshal was intercepted at Dover and invited to take office.'⁶⁶ Churchill makes no mention of pressure from the Press or the Conservatives. Yet, while he probably exaggerates his own role in events, he could well have had a strong influence on Asquith at this point, given that the latter had no military expertise of his own.

As Asquith recalled about his relationship with Kitchener:

My... acquaintance with him before August, 1914 was very slight. His visits to England were rare... On one of my official visits to the Mediterranean [in 1912] he came over from Egypt to Malta... to confer with Mr. Churchill and myself...

⁶³Bodleian Library, Ms. Milner, Dep.85, 1914 diary.

⁶⁴David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs, Vol. I*, (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1933), p. 80.

⁶⁵Haldane, *Autobiography*, pp. 278 and 281.

⁶⁶Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill, Vol. III, 1914-16*, (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 28.

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It was impossible not to be impressed with his striking and formidable personality...⁶⁷

Following the Malta conference, Asquith told his wife, Margot, that Kitchener was 'the only soldier with brains since [Field Marshal Sir Garnet] Wolseley.'⁶⁸ The pair had crossed paths several times more recently. They met on 30 June and again, at lunch, on 31 July.⁶⁹ Margot Asquith knew Kitchener rather better and, according to his engagement diary, hosted him for meals on 1 and 21 July.⁷⁰ She later admitted, 'When he was appointed to the War Office in 1914, I was one of the few people who regretted it. I had known him from girlhood and, while recognising his charm, was aware of his limitations... he had neither the temperament nor the training for team work.' There are no indications, however, that she actively worked against the appointment.⁷¹

The Prime Minister may have delayed a decision about the future leadership of the War Office simply because he was extremely busy. Biographers of Kitchener have sometimes missed this obvious point. One writes that, for forty-eight hours after his return to London, 'a series of conferences was held as to how the country could best make use of his services', creating the impression ministers had little else to worry about.⁷² But Kitchener returned from Dover on the 3.15 train, presumably reaching London in the early evening⁷³, where there was a maelstrom of activity. That day, Asquith had met Conservative leaders, chaired two Cabinets, dealt with four threatened ministerial resignations and attended the House of Commons to listen to Grey's lengthy speech justifying war. These commitments alone would explain why he may have left Kitchener in limbo for a time.

Then again, there are signs that Asquith did not entirely abandon Kitchener in the manner sometimes suggested. For example, there is evidence that, on 4 August, Asquith asked Haldane to sound out Kitchener on becoming Secretary for War.⁷⁴ More significantly, Margot Asquith says her husband *personally* consulted Kitchener about the War Office. Her diary was often written days after events and it is difficult to square it with other evidence about Kitchener's appointment. The relevant entry, written on 15 August, records, 'on 3rd August 1914, the day Henry stopped K. going

⁶⁷H.H. Asquith, 'Lord Kitchener', *Saturday Evening Post*, 10 Dec. 1921.

⁶⁸Spender and Asquith, *Asquith, II*, p.18.

⁶⁹Brocks, *Letters*, pp. 93 and 138.

⁷⁰TNA,PRO30/57/116.

⁷¹Margot Asquith, *Autobiography, Volume 2*, (London: Penguin, 1936), pp. 130-32.

⁷²Hodges, *Kitchener*, p. 223.

⁷³*Birmingham Mail*, 3 August.

⁷⁴Maurice, *Haldane, Vol. I*, p. 357; Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 281.

to Egypt, he sounded him about taking the W. Office.' When Margot remarked, 'I suppose he jumped at it?', Asquith had replied: 'Not he! He didn't want it at all...' Next day, however, Margot met the society hostess Ethel Grenfell, who had seen Kitchener and commented, 'Isn't it splendid of K. to have offered his services at once to the Government!' Margot commented in her diary that the episode was 'a side-light on K.'s methods', adding, 'I knew after that he would accept.'⁷⁵ If Margot Asquith's account is correct, Kitchener was offered the War Office but initially refused it, then gave the impression to others – like Milner and Lovat – he had not been offered it at all.

This serves as a reminder that Kitchener was no passive participant in events after his return to London and it fits in with other odd pieces of evidence. There are strong hints, for example, that on 4 August, before he met these two, a decision *had* been taken on Kitchener's future, even if he was initially reluctant to stay in London. At some point that day, Kitchener sent Asquith a message, which reads, 'I am very much obliged to you for your note. Might I ask you to let me know if there is any objection now to my making arrangements to leave for Egypt on the P & O next Friday.'⁷⁶ Philip Magnus says Kitchener was telephoned by Asquith's Private Secretary and told he must not do this.⁷⁷ Rawlinson, who became Director of Recruiting at the W.O. on the 4 August, recorded, 'on that day it seemed more than likely that Lord Kitchener would be appointed Secretary of State...'⁷⁸; in the evening, Amery was 'cheered... by a message... that Haldane was definitely going...'⁷⁹; while Henry Wilson's diary recorded, 'Haldane is out & K is in & takes over Thursday. Good.'⁸⁰ Most tellingly, at 4.20 p.m. the Foreign Office telegraphed Cairo, notifying them that 'Lord Kitchener's return is indefinitely postponed.'⁸¹ It is impossible to understand why such an official message was sent, unless he was being seriously considered for some senior, long-term position at home and was believed likely to accept. Yet, it was sent about two hours before Milner and Lovat supposedly found him in 'a thoroughly bewildered and disgruntled frame of mind', complaining about being ignored.

⁷⁵Michael and Eleanor Brock, eds., *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. xviii and 14-15.

⁷⁶TNA PRO30/57176, Kitchener to Asquith, 4 August.

⁷⁷But he cites no evidence for this: Philip Magnus, *Kitchener: portrait of an imperialist* (London: John Murray, 1958), p. 277.

⁷⁸Maurice, *Rawlinson*, p. 98.

⁷⁹John Barnes and David Nicholson, eds. *The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume One, 1896-1929*, (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 108.

⁸⁰Imperial War Museum, London, Henry Wilson diary, 4 August.

⁸¹TNA FO371/1968/35571, draft telegram 64, 4 August.

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Once again, Edmund Gosse may help to disentangle what may have happened, even if his retrospective account (written two months later) is weakened by some mis-dating. He not only claims Kitchener attended War Councils with ministers on 3 and 4 August, but dates *The Times'* attack on Haldane to 6 August. Every one of these dates is one day awry. Nonetheless, he gives a detailed account of events on (he says) 5 August, which would make perfect sense if they had actually occurred the previous day. He relates overhearing members of the House of Lords complaining about the 'neglect' shown to Kitchener. Lord Newton, a Conservative peer, said the Field Marshal was 'in a rage. He says that no attention is paid to what he thinks and no advice is asked for from him... There is that fellow Haldane going to be gazetted Secretary of State for War tomorrow, and no notice taken of Kitchener at all...' Gosse was so concerned that he wrote a letter to Haldane, who met him (Gosse says in the early evening) and declared 'I had not the least notion that Kitchener was in that mood', before promising to see Asquith about it.

A few days later, Haldane reported back to Gosse that he had seen the Prime Minister and told him, 'England is more important than Egypt... and the mere fact of K. of K. being at the War Office will unite all parties in the country more than anything else.' Gosse adds that Asquith agreed. Haldane then saw Kitchener, having 'no difficulty in soothing him.'⁸² Whatever the problems with the timings in Gosse's account, his claim about a meeting between the Lord Chancellor and Asquith would explain why, on the evening of 4 August, Downing Street issued a formal denial to the Press that Haldane was to become Secretary for War.⁸³ This highly significant – and long public piece of evidence – has somehow been missed in existing accounts of Kitchener's appointment. But if Haldane was not to become Secretary for War, Kitchener was the most likely alternative.

The Appointment

It is impossible to find any evidence to support Cassar's unreferenced assertion that 'With few exceptions the members of the Asquith Government... were anxious to bar Kitchener's entry to the War Office'.⁸⁴ The most detailed sources, such as the ministerial diaries by J. A. Pease and Lewis Harcourt or the letters written by another Cabinet minister, Herbert Samuel, do not even hint at such opposition. But other considerations probably delayed Kitchener's appointment. For example, attention had to be paid to the situation in Cairo. Haldane later recalled that the FO 'was unwilling that [Kitchener] should be moved from his post as Consul-General in Egypt. In that country trouble was then apprehended'; he adds that this 'was the sole cause of the

⁸²Gosse, 'What I saw.'

⁸³For example, *The Scotsman* or *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5 August.

⁸⁴Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 175.

delay... in the appointment of Lord Kitchener...⁸⁵ The Press reported Kitchener as visiting the Foreign Office at 10.15 on 5 August and being 'for some time busy in the department.'⁸⁶ But by lunchtime, the appointment was settled: King George V's diary shows that he was informed at 1 p.m. that Kitchener would take over the WO.⁸⁷ Haldane, in a 5 August letter to his sister, says he personally 'told K that he was about to be offered the W.O. He was hugely delighted. He seemed to have thought that I would take it against him.'⁸⁸

Time was also taken up in negotiating the precise terms on which Kitchener would serve. Again, rather than passively accepting his future role, he seems to have worked manipulatively behind-the-scenes to secure it, but then needed some tempting to commit himself to it and membership of the Cabinet. In 1910, Repington doubted Kitchener 'can possibly serve a radical government as Secretary for War' because, even if he adopted a detached attitude, he must 'share in the collective responsibility for its acts.'⁸⁹ Storrs says that on the afternoon of 5 August, Kitchener 'was summoned to the Cabinet', but this is another error in his account (Kitchener only attended his first Cabinet on 7 August) and he presumably means that the Field Marshal met Asquith in Downing Street. Storrs adds, 'He went, determined to refuse anything less or other than the full position and powers of Secretary of State for War,' which again suggest that Kitchener created difficulties over the appointment. Storrs and others waited until, 'The telephone rang and we were put out of our suspense by the news of unconditional offer and acceptance.'⁹⁰ Features of the agreement included Kitchener being able to return to Cairo after the war and receiving an allowance additional, beyond his £5,000 salary as Secretary of State.⁹¹ Asquith's wrote to Venetia Stanley:

I have taken an important decision today to give up the War Office and install Kitchener there as an emergency man, until the War comes to an end. It was quite impossible for me to go on, now that war is actually in being... K was (to do him justice) not at all anxious to come in, but when it was presented to him as a duty he agreed... It is a hazardous experiment, but the best in the circumstances, I think.⁹²

⁸⁵Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 278.

⁸⁶For example, *Portsmouth Evening News* and *Liverpool Echo*, 5 August.

⁸⁷The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, King George V's diary, GV/PRIV/GVD/1914: 5 August.

⁸⁸Haldane papers, MS.6012, letter to sister, 5 August.

⁸⁹Morris, ed., *Repington Letters*, p. 164.

⁹⁰Storrs, *Orientations*, pp. 146-47.

⁹¹Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 176.

⁹²Brocks, *Letters*, p. 157.

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Kitchener was formally sworn in at a Privy Council at lunchtime on 6 August⁹³, attending his first Cabinet the following day.⁹⁴

Asquith probably intended that Haldane would exert some control should Kitchener's authoritarian streak create problems. The new Secretary for War certainly had an immediate impact, not least by insisting that two divisions of the British Expeditionary Force should be retained in England, some of them being deployed to meet a suspected German invasion.⁹⁵ On 12 August, the Prime Minister admitted, 'Lord K has rather demoralised the War Office with his bull in the china shop manners and methods... I set Haldane onto him yesterday...'⁹⁶ Sir John Cowans, the Quarter-Master General, told Margot Asquith that Kitchener 'caused chaos and despair at first', but 'strong hints from the PM and Haldane made him change at once.'⁹⁷ Yet, in fact, Haldane failed to prevent Kitchener making major policy changes, especially by raising his 'New Armies' through an appeal for volunteers, rather than simply expanding the Territorial Force.⁹⁸ Maurice speculates that the attacks on Haldane in the Press 'lessened in Kitchener's eyes the value of Haldane's advice and made him more disposed to go his own way'.⁹⁹ In late 1915, Haldane complained that Kitchener 'has not been a great success in administering the War Office... I wish I could go there, for I think I know what is required... but thanks to certain newspapers, that cannot be.'¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Kitchener's biographers tend to portray him as a reluctant hero, eager to return to Egypt, caught at Dover in the nick of time, ignored on his return to London, then forced on a sceptical Prime Minister and reluctant Liberal ministry by the pressure from Conservatives and the Press. But the thesis contradicts itself: why did someone who desperately wished to leave Britain on 3 August, have any right to complain about the delay of mere hours in giving him a senior appointment the following day? Some make unprovable assertions, such as Cassar's, that, on 3 August, 'More and more the man in the street... was heard to repeat the same tale – that Kitchener was going and he must be kept here.'¹⁰¹ The truth is that Kitchener could not travel across France on 3 August anyway; substantial evidence is lacking that the Conservatives had much impact on Asquith's decision; and, while Repington's initial call for Kitchener to

⁹³Fitzroy, *Memoirs*, p. 561.

⁹⁴Bodleian Library, Lewis Harcourt papers, Ms.Eng.c.8269, Political Journal, 7 August.

⁹⁵Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 133.

⁹⁶Brocks, *Letters*, p. 168.

⁹⁷Brocks, *War Diary*, p. 24.

⁹⁸Haldane, *Autobiography*, pp. 278-89; and see Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, pp. 40-46.

⁹⁹Maurice, *Haldane*, I, pp. 359-61.

¹⁰⁰Haldane to his mother, 6 November 1915, MS.5994, NLS.

¹⁰¹Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 173.

become Secretary for War was significant, the subsequent demands for this from certain newspapers only came on 5 August, too late to make much difference. While there was broad Press approval of Kitchener's appointment, the newspaper campaign in his favour was less than universal. Many editors refused to join Northcliffe in castigating Haldane, whose selection would also have pleased leading generals, including Haig. Neither did the appointment prove an unmitigated success. Among historians, Cameron Hazlehurst felt Kitchener's appointment 'the most ominous event of the early weeks of the war'¹⁰², while John Gooch has called it 'a grave mistake – perhaps Asquith's greatest during his wartime period of office.'¹⁰³ If anything, the Prime Minister ought to have considered it more carefully.

Cassar's questions about Asquith's behaviour – 'why did he allow [Kitchener] to start for Egypt on 3 August? When Kitchener returned... why did Asquith wait forty-eight hours before rendering a verdict? And in the interim why... select Haldane to take over... the War Office?' – can be answered, without falling back on his conclusion that 'the clamour for Kitchener took on unprecedented proportions and Asquith was forced to submit to the national will.'¹⁰⁴ Only on 3 August was it clear the Liberal cabinet was prepared to take the country to war, Haldane was never 'selected' to take over the WO on a permanent basis – such a course was publicly ruled out by Downing Street on 4 August – and there were several reasons why Kitchener, who arrived back in London in the early evening of 3 August, was only announced as Secretary for War two days later. In the interim, Britain went to war and there was much to do. Also, attention had to be paid to the good administration of Egypt. Other reasons for delay included his own behaviour, including an initial reluctance to become Secretary of State and desire to set his own terms for acceptance. In any case, Kitchener's appointment was far smoother than some biographers later dramatised it and there is no evidence that it was delayed by opposition from within the Liberal government. By 4.20 on 4 August, less than twenty-four hours after returning to London, it was evident he would not go back to Cairo quickly and his appointment to the WO was settled around mid-day on 5 August, barely 48 hours after his recall from Dover. Ironically, the contemporary evidence suggests the most important person who urged the appointment was the much-maligned Haldane.

¹⁰²Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War*, (London: Cape 1971) p. 152.

¹⁰³John Gooch, *The Plans of War*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1974) p. 299.

¹⁰⁴Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 177.