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On: 14 November 2014, At: 08:01

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

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Published online: 11 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel R. H. Beadon C.B.E., R.A.S.C. (1920) The Supreme War Council of the Allied and Associated Nations, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 65:457, 105-115, DOI: [10.1080/03071842009419361](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071842009419361)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071842009419361>

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THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL OF THE ALLIED AND ASSOCIATED NATIONS.

ITS ORIGIN, ORGANIZATION, AND WORK.

By BREVET LIEUT.-COLONEL R. H. BEADON, C.B.E., R.A.S.C.

UP to the present time very little has necessarily been able to appear publicly concerning the inter-Allied organization at Versailles known as the "Supreme War Council," and it is probable also that details of the larger portion of its work will never be made known outside a comparatively limited circle, for similar reasons that the ramifications of a Government Department such as the Foreign Office seldom in all their fullness see the light of day. But on such information as was possessed by its critics there have been few organizations that have been such a target for criticism. It is not the purpose here to answer these criticisms except in so far as the general ideas of the functions and work of the Supreme War Council are in themselves an answer, but rather to present some few facts which are not in themselves uninteresting or uninformative.

THE ORIGIN AND FUNCTIONS OF THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL.

The necessity for the creation of some such body as the Supreme War Council had been foreseen and suggested by the late Lord Kitchener early in 1915, but it was not, however, till two years later that circumstances rendered it imperative to carry the idea into practice. The strategical surprise effected by the Germans against the Italian Army, with the consequent reverse sustained by the latter, brought matters to a head, and it became evident that a very much closer co-operation was necessary for a successful prosecution of the war by the Allied nations.

As far as the Central Powers were concerned, the mind of Germany dominated their military policy and gave it effective coherence and meaning. Germany was, however, accepted as the predominant partner because her contribution was far greater than any of her partners.

The efforts of the Allies, each of whom was individually exerting his uttermost strength, on the other hand, lacked co-ordination, and the intermittent conferences between the heads of the various States, though enabling many differences and divergencies of opinion to be smoothed over, could not ensure close and continuous working on common plans that should meet with the approval and agreement of all. Such plans could only be ensured by regular and frequent counsel together between the heads of the various Governments allied and

associated together against the Central Powers. It was obviously impracticable that all could participate, as several of the minor States at war with Germany and her Allies were taking no active part in the war at all, and others but a very small one which, even proportionately, was in no way commensurate with the efforts made by England, France, Italy, and subsequently were to be made by America, whose adhesion in the spring of 1917 promised to be the decisive factor, were the war to be continued another eighteen months or two years. The United States was, in fact, at that period the great reserve force of the Allies, and though their assistance up to that time had been confined to moral, financial, and material support, their development as a military Power was already taking shape, and the advance guard of their armies had even then arrived in Europe. Very naturally they were therefore invited to participate from the beginning, though they had not been represented at the initial meeting at Rapallo on November 7th, 1917.

The only other Great Power technically at war with Germany and her Allies was Russia. There the unrecognized Communist Government was in power with the avowed object of making peace at the earliest date, and it was therefore obviously impossible that overtures could be made to them to participate.

The smaller nations were ignored as far as permanent representation was concerned, though provision was made for the attendance of any of their representatives when occasion demanded.

The agreement arrived at at Rapallo provided that the Supreme War Council should consist of two representatives from each of the Great Powers, the Prime Minister, and one other Minister of Cabinet rank. It was thus primarily a political and not a military body, its object being to secure such adjustment and co-ordination of national policies as would make possible the execution of a single, comprehensive strategic plan of Allied operations. The working out of such a plan on broad lines in its technical military aspect was assigned to permanent military representatives, who would have at their disposal both the information in possession of, and the separate plans put forward by, the several General Staffs, but details were, of course, to be left to the Commanders-in-Chief on the several fronts. Other advisers on the various technical aspects of the war were to be called in as required. It was contemplated that the full Council should meet, if possible, at least once every month, the military representatives being, on the other hand, in continued session.

To give effect to the above scheme the following resolutions were adopted:—

I. The representatives of the British, French, and Italian Governments, assembled at Rapallo on November 7th, 1917, agree on the scheme for the organization of a Supreme War Council with a permanent military representative from each Power.

II. *Scheme of Organization of a Supreme War Council.*—

(1) With a view to the better co-ordination of military action on the Western Front a Supreme War Council is created, composed

of the Prime Minister and a member of the Government of each of the Great Powers whose armies are fighting on that front. The extension of the scope of the Council to other fronts is reserved for discussion with the other Great Powers.¹

(2) The Supreme War Council has for its mission to watch over the general conduct of the war. It prepares recommendations for the decision of the Governments, and keeps itself informed of their execution and reports thereon to the respective Governments.

(3) The General Staffs and Military Commands of the armies of each Power charged with the conduct of military operations remain responsible to their respective Governments.

(4) The general war plans drawn up by the competent military authorities are submitted to the Supreme War Council, which, under the high authority of the Governments, ensures their concordance, and submits, if need be, any necessary changes.

(5) Each Power delegates to the Supreme War Council one permanent military representative, whose exclusive function is to act as technical adviser to the Council.

(6) The military representatives receive from the Government and the competent military authorities of their country all the proposals, information, and documents relating to the conduct of the war.

(7) The military representatives watch day by day the situation of the forces, and the means of all kinds of which the Allied armies and the enemy armies dispose.

(8) The Supreme War Council meets normally at Versailles, where the permanent military representatives and their staffs are established. They may meet at other places as may be agreed upon, according to circumstances. The meetings of the Supreme War Council will take place at least once a month.

The above resolutions make clear that the Supreme War Council was in the first place a political and not a military body. The only actual members were to be the Prime Ministers of three Great Powers; in the case of the United States such adviser as might be designated by the President; and also one other Cabinet Minister. As this second Minister need not always be the same Minister, the Supreme War Council was in substance to be a Council of Prime Ministers, *i.e.*, of

¹ The representatives of the Great Powers attending the Rapallo meeting were as follows:—

For Great Britain—Mr. Lloyd George, Lieut.-General Smuts, General Robertson, and General Sir Henry Wilson.

For Italy—Baron Sonnino.

For France—M. Painlevé, M. Franklin-Bouillon, M. Barrère, General Foch, General Gondrecourt, and General Weygand.

Secretaries—Lieut.-Colonel Hankey, Count Aldrovandi, and Commandant Helbronner.

As regards the United States of America, arrangements were made for Mr. A. H. Frazier, Counsellor of Embassy, American Embassy, Paris, to attend meetings of the military representatives pending the appointment of an American military representative. Mr. Frazier, however, was merely to hold a watching brief on behalf of the United States of America.

In January, 1918, General Tasker H. Bliss took up his duties at Versailles as Permanent Military Representative, American Section, Supreme War Council.

the men who have the final decision on all questions of policy and action in their respective countries. Once these were agreed on a policy they were in a position to carry it out, assuming always they retained the support of their colleagues and their Parliaments.

"The Supreme War Council was thus to be an instrument for arriving at a common policy in the conduct of the war. It was not to be an instrument for carrying out that policy. It was, however, designed to be far more efficient than the periodical conferences between the Governments which had been carried on at intervals throughout the war. But, constitutionally speaking, it was on the same footing as these conferences. The Council could not by a mere majority decision compel one of the Governments represented to carry out a policy of which it disapproved. Nor had it any field of executive authority of its own apart from the executive authority of the Governments represented, which remained as it was before. Its creation had not altered anything in the constitutional position and responsibility of the Governments taking part in it or of any organ of these Governments. In this respect the best parallel to the Supreme War Council known to British constitutional practice was the Imperial Conference, a body whose object was to promote identity of policy and co-operation among the different Governments of the British Empire without in any way affecting their constitutional autonomy.

"But, as was obvious under the stress of the urgency of war, the Supreme War Council had to develop from the outset certain machinery for securing its own continuity and the proper presentment to it of the subject matter of its discussions. In the first place the continuity of its working was to be largely maintained during the interval between the monthly meetings by frequent visits on the part of the second Minister, who, as a member of the Supreme War Council, and acting in full touch with the Prime Minister, should be able to maintain informally that direct personal contact between the heads of Governments which was the essence of the idea which underlay the whole fabric.

"A very important portion of the machinery lay in the appointment of a body of permanent military representatives, one for each Power, whose duty it was with staffs to assist them in their work, to study the whole military situation in the light of all the factors that affected it and to submit collective, reasoned conclusions to the Supreme War Council which were considered and, if accepted, translated into action by the Governments concerned."

ORGANIZATION OF THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL.

The scheme for the organization of the Supreme War Council as adopted at Rapallo was translated into action as follows:—

1. *Permanent Military Representatives.*—Each Power delegated to the Supreme War Council one permanent military representative, whose exclusive function was to act as technical adviser to the Council. Each military representative was to receive from his Government and the competent military authorities of his country all the proposals,

information, and documents relating to the conduct of the war, and to watch day by day the situation of the forces and the means of all kinds of which the Allied armies and the enemy armies disposed. The offices of the permanent military representatives were established at Versailles: and for this purpose the Trianon Palace Hotel was requisitioned and placed at their disposal by the French Government.

The following military representatives were appointed and took up their duties at Versailles at the end of November, 1917:—

France: General Weygand.

Great Britain: General Sir Henry Wilson.

Italy: General Cadorna.

For the United States of America General Tasker Bliss took up his duties in January, 1918.

In order to enable the military representatives to carry out the duties allotted to them as above defined, it was decided at the second session of the Supreme War Council, held at Versailles on December 1st, 1917, that they should be provided with all the necessary documentary and other information. And, in order to facilitate the reception and distribution between the Allied representatives of this information, that each section of the Supreme War Council was to comprise a permanent secretarial staff.

In addition to the exchange of papers and information, which went on continuously, it was decided that formal meetings of the military representatives should take place at frequent intervals.

As regards the procedure to be followed at these meetings, it was decided at the third meeting of the military representatives held at Versailles on Wednesday, December 12th, 1917, that at each sitting of the military representatives one of the military representatives should act as chairman of that particular sitting and direct its proceedings. In practice each military representative was asked to take the chair in turn, following the order of entry of the four countries represented into the war.

It was also decided that the advice tendered to the Supreme War Council by the military representatives should take the form of joint Notes. It was agreed that joint Notes should be signed by all the military representatives and sent by each section of the Supreme War Council to the heads of their respective Governments.

On February 28th, 1918, the military representatives passed the following further resolution:—

“After a brief exchange of views, the military representatives decided that, in cases of emergency, three military representatives would constitute a quorum, and that the absent military representative might be represented by his Chief-of-Staff, who could in such case sign for him.”

Further, at the thirty-first meeting of the military representatives, held on May 19th, 1918, the following resolution was adopted:—

“The Military representatives decided that joint Notes must represent the unanimous opinion of the military representatives, and will be signed by each of the four representatives.”

The first meeting of the military representatives was held in the Council Chamber, Versailles, on December 4th, 1917, at 3.30 p.m., and between that date and November 12th, 1918, fifty-one meetings took place. At these meetings a variety of questions were formally discussed, and unanimous decisions were reached on a variety of different subjects. The decisions, which represented the unanimous advice of the military representatives to their Governments, were, as stated above, expressed in the form of joint Notes.

2. A Naval Liaison Committee constituted the necessary link between the military representatives and the Inter-Allied Naval Council sitting in London.

3. Dependent on the military representatives were the Inter-Allied Technical Committees on Aviation and Tanks. These committees, besides affording opportunities for interchange of views on the organization and development of these more modern branches of military science, also acted as first-hand technical advisers on subjects either referred to them by the military representatives or initiated by themselves. Their recommendations were either embodied in the joint Notes submitted to the Supreme War Council, or were forwarded to the authorities concerned.

(a) *Inter-Allied Aviation Committee.*

This Committee was created by joint Note No. 7 of January 8th, 1918.

The first meeting took place on May 9th, 1918, at Versailles. In the course of various sittings this Committee studied and unified—

- (1) The future programme of inter-Allied aviation.
- (2) The creation of an inter-Allied long-distance bombing force.

(b) *Inter-Allied Tank Committee.*

This Committee was created by joint Note No. 9 on January 8th, 1918.

This Committee, the first meeting of which took place on May 6th, 1918, drew up and secured acceptance to a construction and organization programme for this entirely new arm.

4. The Inter-Allied Transportation Council acted in an advisory capacity in supplying information regarding transportation problems confronting both the Allies and the Central Powers.

This Council, created by joint Note No. 8 of January 8th, 1918, received freedom of action from the Supreme War Council, and was made an executive body not dependent on the latter.

In close liaison with the military representatives it improved the output of lines of communication, especially those with Italy, and brought about a better use of various inter-Allied rolling stock.

5. *The Organization of the British Section.*—The British Section of the Supreme War Council, formed in November, 1917, consisted of a small number of officers specially selected and representative of every combatant branch of the Service to serve on the Staff of the British military representative. The organization of this Staff, as designed by Sir Henry Wilson, was drawn up on a new system.

For, instead of being framed on the usual organization under which a Staff is divided into sub-branches dealing severally with General Staff, Adjutant-Generals' and Quarter-Master Generals' questions, Sir Henry Wilson divided the British Section into three main branches, known as "A" (Allied and neutral), "E" (enemy and neutral), and "M" (man-power and material, Allied and enemy). The advantages of adopting this system of division for Versailles are apparent, when it is remembered that the military representative's Staff acted merely in an advisory capacity, and that the rôle of this Staff was not to frame and issue orders, nor to perform executive duties in any way, but to appreciate the possible effects of the adoption of courses open to the Allies or to the enemy in any theatre of operations, and generally to forecast and study the strategic situations likely to arise in the future.

A short description of the nature of the work of each branch illustrates the working of the system.

"A" (*Allied and Neutral*).—In this branch the situation of the Allied forces on all fronts was kept up to date, and the military aspect of the strategic situation, as visualized by an imaginary Supreme Commander, was repeatedly summarized and revised. Did the enemy branch prepare an offensive on any front (on paper), the Allied branch countered this by suggesting means by which such an offensive could be met. Owing to the gigantic extent of the world war, the problems, even if only treated from the broadest of aspects, were exceedingly intricate. The branch was sub-divided so that different officers specialized in the several theatres.

"E" (*Enemy and Neutral*).—The problems arising from the situations on the various fronts were presented by "E" branch entirely as if originating from the enemy High Command. Papers were produced dealing with the possibilities of successful action on the several fronts, as if drawn up by the enemies' Staff. Consequently the adversaries were working mentally against each other, and the view of a strategic situation which is apt to be formed if the same heads worked out the problems from both points of view, was avoided. "E" branch, like "A," was sub-divided for specialization in the several theatres.

"M" (*Man-Power and Material*).—This branch was divided into three sub-branches; the first dealing with Allied and enemy man-power problems, the second with munitions questions, and the third with supply and transport and transportation considerations.

By "M" branch were issued periodically "strength returns," Allied and enemy, on all fronts, compiled from information obtained from the War Office, G.H.Q's., and the Allied sections of the Supreme War Council. These included estimates of numbers of personnel, guns, machine-guns, aeroplanes, tanks, etc.

One of the most important items of the work carried out by "M" branch was the consideration of the train capacity of the various railways, Allied and enemy, in order that the rate of reinforcements of the several fronts could be calculated for the operations proposed by

"A" and "E" branches. For this work, most valuable assistance was afforded by the members of the Inter-Allied Transportation Council.

Political Branch.—This branch studied the political situation in all countries and issued weekly appreciations from Allied and enemy points of view.

In order to keep the military representative posted with the military and economic situation in all theatres of war, as well as in neutral countries, weekly summaries of information were issued by all branches of the Staff, dealing with the particular subjects dealt with by the branches or sub-branches. Exchange of information was constant between the Allied sections. Representatives of the Staff attended the meetings of the inter-Allied councils and committees on man-power, aeroplanes, tanks, supplies, and munitions.

6. *Organization of the French, American, and Italian Sections.*—

(a) The French section, which was composed originally of some twelve officers, was divided into three sections—Western section, Eastern section, and Economical and Political section.

(b) The American section followed the lines of the British section.

(c) The Italian section was not divided upon the above lines, but worked as a whole.

7. *Joint Secretariat.*—The permanent secretarial staffs of the respective countries in concert organized a joint secretarial bureau for the production and distribution of the notices, agenda, protocols, and *procès-verbaux* of the meetings of the Supreme War Council and other collective business.

THE WORK OF THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL.

Even retrospectively it is not easy to estimate fully the value of the work accomplished by the Supreme War Council during its existence. It is certain that such estimation cannot be effected by a mere detailing of the questions that were considered and the decisions arrived at. It is important to go beyond these in indicating what cannot be recorded in tabulated or statistical form on paper—not only because such factors are liable to be overlooked, but rather because they were none the less vital to the end in view—one mind for the Allied nations.

Like every innovation, the Supreme War Council was the subject of much criticism. On the one hand was the point of view that its existence would interfere with the authority of the several commanders-in-chief in the field, which it would tend to weaken, and therefore threaten the freedom of action of the Governments they represented.

On the other hand it was urged that the powers of the Council and its military advisers did not go far enough to ensure real utility, in that no executive authority was vested in it by a majority vote, and that it therefore could in fact fulfil no rôle that could not be fulfilled by the system of periodical conferences in which the heads of the various Governments had up to that time participated when

they were dependent for their military advice on their respective Chiefs of Staff in their Ministries of War for the equivalent.

The first of these criticisms overlooked the fact that there was practically no parallel for the circumstances of the Grand Alliance—not only from the number of nations involved and the extent and vastness of the struggle, but from the complexity of the issues which were growing more and more intricate as the war progressed. To meet an unprecedented situation, in fact, unprecedented measures were necessary.

As regards the argument that the powers of the Council were not wide enough, it must be remembered that, unlike the Central Powers, no one nation was the admitted leader of the Grand Alliance, but all were equal partners as far as the Great Powers participating were concerned. The minimum interference with the rights and interests of each by the others was necessarily aimed at and the evils of over-centralization fully taken into account.

Compromises—for the Supreme War Council was a compromise—are never ideal, but they are often eminently practical in that they not only serve the needs of the hour but are in themselves evolutionary in their very essence.

This is clearly shown by the steps that eventually led to the appointment of a Supreme Commander-in-Chief for the Western Front. The idea of unified command in the most important theatre had long been considered and generally, in view of difficulties that need not be discussed here, dismissed as impracticable. Yet, looking back, it is clear that such command was inevitable, and no one now would admit but that it was right. The arguments against it were necessarily political—certainly no reasons definitely military could be advanced. Politics must, however, dominate war in its highest sense—as war is, in fact, only a continuation of politics by other means. And, therefore, until the political objections could be overcome the operations of the Allied armies in the Western theatre were handicapped against an enemy with one single purpose and one single will.

Just as the necessity for closer inter-Allied co-operation in the shape of a Supreme War Council was demonstrated by the reverse sustained in the Italian theatre in the previous October, so was the necessity for a still further step made clear by the reverse sustained in the French theatre in the following March.

The logical outcome of a Supreme War Council was a Supreme Commander-in-Chief (in each of the minor theatres where Allied troops were co-operating he already existed).

If the Supreme War Council never fulfilled any other purpose than that of a mere stepping stone to unified command—subsequently so brilliantly justified by results—it would have more than rewarded those who were responsible for its creation. Nor is there anything to show that the unified command could have been accomplished by any other means than by a body as had by its very existence prepared public opinion for such measure; and further, at the very crisis of the war was able to impose it.

Of the subjects and volume of the questions dealt with by the Supreme War Council, two may be cited as examples of how complete and rapid unity was attained among the Allies at critical moments.

The first of these was the decision taken at the fifth session, in May, 1918, as regards the transportation of American troops.

By this the American Government, putting aside for the moment the question of building up a complete and self-contained American Army in France as had been the original intention, agreed to give absolute priority during the months of June and July to the transportation of combatant troops and men for the service of the railways. The numbers fixed were 170,000 combatant troops for the month of June and 25,400 men for the service of the railways. For the month of July 140,000 combatant troops. This sacrifice on the part of the United States Government of the national aspirations for the common good was met by one even greater in its way by the British Government, which, in spite of the very serious shortage then existing, turned over sufficient shipping to carry some 60 per cent. of the American troops to Europe.

The second instance that may be cited lay in the acceptance by the Supreme War Council of the recommendation made by the military representatives as regards an offensive in the Balkan theatre at the seventh session, in July, 1918, as a consequence of which all preparations were made in agreement among the Allies. The offensive took place in September, and resulted in the surrender of Bulgaria on the 29th of that month, which was an important factor in convincing the remainder of the enemy of the futility of further resistance. The success of the Balkan offensive may without exaggeration be said to have been largely responsible for the end of the war by 1918.

Nor is it easy to see how such an extensive and well-planned series of operations could have been carried out by the heterogeneous forces comprising the Allied armies in that theatre had not the inspiration come from common counsel and common agreement above.

Beyond the definite steps taken and the tasks accomplished there was what has been touched on previously—the results that are not apparent on the surface. The Supreme War Council was in its conception and genesis an attempt to “get together” on the part of the Allies and to find common ground, and so to evolve a united policy for pursuance of the war.

Such “counsel of perfection” could never probably in any Alliance be fully realized. Yet it is impossible to believe that the Allies could have marched so far on that road together as they eventually did without some common meeting ground.

Up to the time of the formation of the Supreme War Council the only common strategy they had lay in their aims to beat the enemy. Yet, as has been expressed in a paper written in the British Section at Versailles, beating the enemy was “really a negative conception” in that it implied that this was the only way to prevent him beating them, and that therefore the idea was fundamentally defensive, not constructive.

It was essential to go beyond this if the maximum effort of the Allies was to be exerted and to reach a more extended basis of agreement, which could be moulded into offensive efforts with definite coherence and meaning.

If Versailles had been no more than an inter-Allied clearing house and a meeting place where the Allied Staffs could exchange ideas it would have justified its existence, for it contained under one roof the Staffs of the four Great Powers in the Alliance working constantly and continuously together. The broadening influence in the mind of such association cannot be over-estimated. Indeed, it is so obvious it need not be enlarged upon.

Criticism has not been wanting that the co-operation between the Allies, even despite these considerations, never became sufficiently close. But interference with the internal affairs of each or any was always to be deprecated. It was the products of the national efforts of each that required to be co-ordinated, and not the ways by which these products were obtained. For each one of the Allied nations had developed and grown great on its own particular lines, and it would have been unnatural to have attempted to standardize them.

Versailles did give those associated with it a supremely useful experience and a broad inter-Allied view which were subsequently of great value to the Allied cause.¹

Lastly, the Supreme War Council at Versailles formed a precedent, and this fact, together with the experience gained by its actual working, should not be lost sight of for future eventualities.

If the Grand Alliance or any such similar one should ever again be called into existence—and the treaty made by both Great Britain and the United States to defend France once more against an unprovoked attack by Germany shows the possibility—then similar work and similar tasks would be necessitated once more.

¹ This is especially emphasized when the subsequent rôles of many of the officers who served in the military sections there are recalled. For example:—

General Sir Henry Wilson left to become Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

General F. H. Sykes left to become Chief of the Air Staff.

General Sackville-West subsequently became Chief of the British Military Delegation to the Peace Conference.

Lieut.-Colonel Lord Stanhope left to become Under Secretary of State for War.

Lieut.-Colonel Amery, M.P., left to become Under Secretary of State for the Colonies.

In the French section General Weygand, who was the French military representative until March 26th, 1918, went with General Foch as his Chief of Staff when the latter was appointed Commander-in-Chief on the Western Front.

General Bliss, the American representative, afterwards became one of the American plenipotentiaries at the Peace Conference.