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Curzon’s War and Curzon’s Peace

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For Lord Curzon, the First World War and its immediate aftermath was a time of expectation and hope, only partially fulfilled. The keynote of this period for the former Viceroy of India was opportunism and the possibility of attaining strategic security for the British Empire. In September 1914, to prolonged cheering at St Andrew’s Hall in Glasgow, he anticipated an imperial war. Indian troops, in aiding the Empire, would be fighting ‘for something more than power; it [the Empire] stood for justice, uprightness, good government, mercy and truth.’ And it would be a victor’s peace: a war against the rule of Satan on Earth. Indian troops would be in at the death, their lances fluttering down the streets of Berlin.\(^1\) During the war he repeatedly disclaimed imperial motives.\(^2\) But the record of his official dealings and of his private correspondence, suggests that this was only partly true. In a victory speech to the House of Lords on 19 November 1918, Curzon congratulated the British people on the role played by the Empire in winning the war and in terms of the position it occupied at its close.\(^3\) That power and influence had then to be applied to securing an enduring settlement: one with the necessary imperial safeguards.

However, obstacles abounded in terms of achieving these imperial aims, both during and after the war. These included the misguided ideas of politicians, who lacked Curzon’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the East, the ideas of Woodrow Wilson, the emergence of Arab nationalism, obstructive and avaricious Allies, the chaos in Russia, and the broad phenomenon of, mainly Bolshevik-inspired, unrest which culminated in Curzon’s 1923 Note of Protest to Moscow. Curzon chaired several War Cabinet committees which oversaw British policy in the Middle East and Central Asia, and in 1917 he chaired the Imperial War Cabinet’s Territorial Committee, which devised peace desiderata with specific reference to imperial affairs.\(^4\) As Acting Foreign Secretary from
February 1919, and Foreign Secretary proper, from October 1919, he had opportunity to apply wartime planning, as well as his own distinctive ideas about the post-war world, to its settlement. It was also a fitting tribute to his labours, as well as to his peculiar abilities, which included a keen sense of protocol, that in February 1919, he was asked to chair a committee to examine the question of peace celebrations.5

David Gilmour and others have recorded Curzon’s frustration arising from his exclusion from the War Council, the War Committee and, intermittently, from the Cabinet.6 In the words of fellow aristocrat, Lord Crewe, he resembled a Rolls Royce, kept only to deliver an occasional parcel to the station.7 During 1915, when Curzon sat on the Dardanelles Committee, Herbert Asquith and Edward Grey contemplated using his talents more effectively but this came to nothing. So, too, suggestions that he might replace Herbert Kitchener as War Secretary or become ambassador in Paris.8 Indeed, until 1917 his energies were dissipated. Amongst other things, he led the Conservative opposition in the House of Lords, and, when he joined the government in May 1915, deputised there for Lord Crewe or Lord Lansdowne. He contributed vigorously to the debate about conscription, he chaired the Shipping Control Committee, and he presided over the Air Board until January 1917. More broadly, he was an assiduous archivist, reading, annotating, and filing papers on a much wider range of issues, including events in Ireland, the holding of British titles and honours by German princes during the war, the sale of honours, the Channel Tunnel scheme, and reform of the House of Lords. On some of these matters, including the undesirability of horse racing during the war, he vented his feelings through the press, and just as often, in his speeches.9 He visited the Western Front on three occasions, once flying with the Royal Flying Corps, and was deeply solicitous regarding the welfare of British and Imperial troops.10 He also maintained a keen interest in senior military appointments, especially those in the Eastern theatres, and evinced strategic/military ideas which, in the summer and autumn of 1917, were sufficiently aligned with Lloyd George’s thinking, to ensure his inclusion in the War Policy Committee.11 And he maintained pre-war interests, many of them related to India, including constitutional reform, and nurtured pre-war grudges, notably, in connection with Indian military administration. However, the prevailing sense was of disappointment and frustration: disappointment that colleagues and officials who knew little or nothing of the East were charged with the oversight of British policy there; frustration that, when so much was at stake and territorial revision and imperial expansion a realistic goal, he was sidelined.