

## **‘CHURCHILL ROLLED THE TANKS INTO THE CROWD’: MYTHOLOGY AND REALITY IN THE MILITARY DEPLOYMENT TO GLASGOW IN 1919**

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### **Abstract**

The ‘Battle of George Square’, 31 January 1919, is perhaps the most mythologised event in 20th-century Scottish history. A demonstration in support of the 40-hours strike descended into a violent riot and the Sheriff of Lanarkshire read the Riot Act and called in military aid, which he had already made sure would be available. Ten thousand, mainly Scottish, troops arrived that night in a city that was already returning to peace, followed three days later by six tanks. A largely mythological version of events has dominated Scottish popular history during the last century and the mythology has more recently developed beyond a narrative of ‘capitalist oppression’ to include one of ‘English oppression’, the deployment of ‘English troops’, by an ‘English government’, ‘sent by Churchill’. This paper attempts to document the formation of the different elements of the mythology (while briefly explain why they *are* myths), how they have developed and been used in popular history and more recently, in political discourse on social media.

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*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

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## Introduction

*'There is a lot of mythology about these events...'*  
(Prof Sir Tom Devine, *The Times*, 03/02/2018)

George Square, in the heart of Glasgow, informally re-named by some as 'Freedom Square', was the iconic space for the public expression of left/nationalist pro-independence activity in the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum. On the evening of the defeat of the 'Yes' campaign the square was invaded by several hundred union-flag waving thugs giving Hitler salutes, taunting pro-independence campaigners: the 'Second Battle of George Square'.

The square has long been a space for public political demonstration, but its iconic status was conferred by the first 'Battle', on Friday 31 January 1919. On that day a demonstration in support of an unofficial strike for a 40-hour working week descended into violence, the 'Battle of George Square', apparently set off by an ill-judged police baton charge. With concerns for public order and the maintenance of the power supplies to the city, military aid was requested by the Sheriff of Lanarkshire and the first of 10,000 troops, mainly from units based in Scotland, began to arrive late that evening; six tanks arrived on the following Monday. It is perhaps the most mythologised event in 20th-century Scottish history. In this case history was not 'written by the victors' and the socialist narrative established at the time in the *Strike Bulletin* and subsequently in the memoirs of the strike leaders became the dominant one. The events following 31 January have now also become part of a nationalist narrative, when 'England invaded' (e.g. 'Traquair', 2016). Only recently has an evidence-based account been published (Barclay, 2018a). The last decade has seen a significant upturn in the posting online of 'facts' relating to the military deployment, which are directly contradicted by the evidence. This paper addresses the origins and main vectors of these myths, as far as they can be determined.

The mythology can be summarised in one sentence:

Churchill sent the tanks, a howitzer and 12,000 young, inexperienced English troops against 100,000 peaceful demonstrators in George Square, many of whom were injured or killed, to crush the strike.

These elements are repeatedly deployed to tell a dramatic story, or to project a narrative of grievance and victimhood, but not a word of this is supported by the contemporary evidence; indeed, most of it is directly contradicted.

This largely mythological narrative has completely occupied published and broadcast popular history of Scotland. For example, the BBC television series, *Andrew Marr's The Making of Modern Britain* (2009, re-broadcast 2018) and its accompanying book (Marr, 2009, 231–2) present a substantially mythologised account. After an introduction over cine-film from the days around 31 January, the still image of a fund-raising tank parade in 1918 (the 'Julian' photo, see below) is represented as an image of events in 1919 (12m 31s) and the myth about 'English troops' is stated boldly (12m 39s). The War Cabinet minutes are misquoted: Marr states that the meeting had been told that the tanks and '100 lorry-loads of troops' were going north that night: the minutes in fact record that 100 lorries with drivers were being sent up by rail that night. There is no evidence for the assertion in the accompanying book, very much echoing the socialist-conspiracist version of events, that the troops and tanks had been despatched to Glasgow even before the riot began: 'By the time the leaders of the strike had gathered in George Square, on Friday 31 January ... six tanks and a hundred motor lorries full of troops had been sent north from England'.

What has been taught about the 'Battle' in the Scottish education system is also problematic. The 2013 edition of the Scottish history textbook for National Curriculum 4 and 5 *The Era of the Great War 1910–1923* (McGonigle & Wood, 2013, 84), contained the statement (my emphases):

In response, the government rushed 12,000 English troops to Glasgow in case a revolution broke out. Scottish troops were locked in their barracks at Maryhill in case they supported the strikers. There were tanks in George Square and machine-gun posts in buildings around the area. Newspapers reported that 90,000 people attended this demonstration....

This short paragraph contains seven statements (underlined) which either cannot be evidenced or are directly contradicted by the evidence. The Higher History textbook, of 2010 (Kerr, 2010) contains similar statements.

Given the all-pervasive nature of the mythology it is hardly surprising that challenges to its major elements (the 'English troops' and 'Churchill sent the tanks' parts in particular) are met with astonishment, surprise and even hostility; these are the expected responses of those whose conclusions have been reached by 'motivated reasoning', a defensive response to contrary evidence, by actively seeking to discredit it or its source, without logical or evidential justification (Kunda, 1990).

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

**Figure 1:**

The veteran tank 'Julian', No. 113, in the Trongate on 14 January 1918, as part of 'Tank Week', a highly successful fund-raising event (*The Bulletin*, 15 January 1918). This version bears the misleading caption from the Herald picture library, eventually corrected in January 2018, that the scene is from January 1919. This image has been that used most often to amplify the 'oppression' narrative



## History/Mythology

The story of George Square has been told in traditional media: academic textbooks and journal articles (e.g. McLean, 1999); general histories of Scotland (e.g. Devine, 2012); popular histories of Glasgow or Red Clydeside (e.g. Craig, 2011; Fry, 2017); school textbooks (Kerr, 2010; McGonigle & Wood, 2013); political pamphlets (Cameron, 1994); magazines and newspapers. Into the 21st century online outlets have dominated: educational resources (Education Scotland, 1999); blogs (e.g. 'lanthepict', 2011; Urban Glasgow, 2008), and social media. Very few of these accounts are based on primary sources (eye-witness accounts recorded near the time; contemporary documents; newspaper reports and photographs).

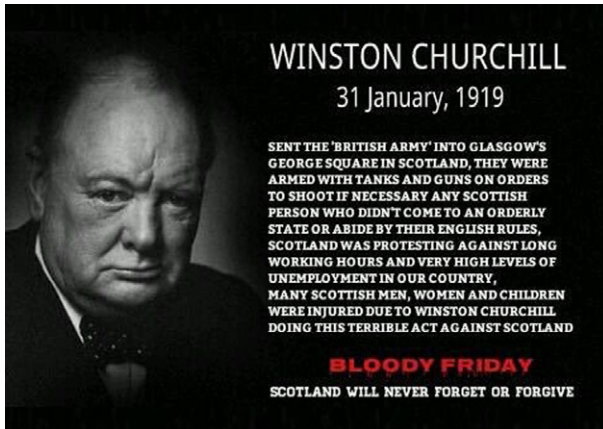
There is also an extensive oral history, on which great reliance may be placed (Damer, 1984, 199–203). Many such stories were, however, recorded years after the events and in important instances are directly contradicted by eye-witness accounts recorded at the time and by contemporary newspaper reports and photographs. Oral history indeed records, ‘the lapses of memory, the lies, the misinterpretations and the Freudian slips’ (Damer, 1980, 19), and ‘not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they thought they did’ (Portelli, 1991, 50).

On social media, the events of George Square and its aftermath are most often referenced to make a political point: anti-capitalist (‘lunarboyx’, 2017); anti-British (Lyons, 2018); or anti-English (Paterson, 2017). Increasingly, Churchill, as symbol of one or more of these, is held personally responsible, as in Figure 2.

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Figure 2:

An almost completely inaccurate anti-Churchill post at the more extreme end of the scale, from 31 January 2016, on Twitter. Churchill didn’t send the army; the army/tanks did not enter George Square during the riot; there were no ‘orders to shoot’; only skilled engineers were striking for a shorter working week, not ‘Scotland’; no-one was injured by the army. (‘mxmovement’, 2016)



*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

## The Mythology

The overall mythology of George Square is made up of a number of elements, described below in approximate order of their appearance. This analysis cannot be definitive as it has relied mainly on formally published and widely-distributed material. Socialist politics has always produced many pamphlets, newsletters and other ephemeral material, which has survived fragmentarily; discoveries in this type of publication may change the date of origin of an element of the narrative and provide more information on its spread.

There are four phases in the development of the narrative:

1. in the immediate aftermath of the events of 31 January 1919;
2. in the memoirs of the strike leaders and their followers, between Gallacher's *Revolt on the Clyde* (1936) and Emmanuel (Manny) Shinwell's fourth memoir *Shinwell Talking*, in 1984;
3. from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, when the Scottish radical left tradition as it is now known – as a fusion of socialism and nationalism – was formed (Scothorne, pers comm; Gall, 2005);
4. in the last two decades or so, as the events of 1919 have developed renewed political resonance.

## Elements of the narrative established in 1919

**'The Government sent the troops; to crush the strike; martial law was imposed'**

Neither the UK Government nor an individual minister could, in the legal structure in force in January 1919, send troops onto the streets of a British city, unless martial law had been declared: it was not declared in this instance.<sup>1</sup> At the War Cabinet on 30 January, General Roberts, the commander of all the troops stationed in the UK, made the legal position clear (my emphasis):

The civil authorities were responsible for law and order, and the military could not step in except at their requisition in accordance with King's Regulations.

(TNA CAB 23/9/9)

In the King's Regulations in force in 1919 (Great Britain, Army, 1914) paragraph 956 stated that the only person with the legal power to call in military aid

in Scotland was the local Sheriff. On 29 or 30 January 1919 the Sheriff of Lanarkshire had, after a meeting with the strike leaders, 'ascertained whether it would be possible to get the assistance of the Military if the Civil Authorities could not cope with the [anticipated] disturbance' (NRS JC36/31, 1919, cross-examination of Sheriff A O M Mackenzie). He read the Riot Act on the 31st, after an unsuccessful attempt by two magistrates to disperse the crowd, and then called for military assistance. The process by which he made that decision was described in the evidence of a number of witnesses at the subsequent trial of the strike leaders (including those called for the defence) (NRS JC36/31, 1919; Barclay, 2018a).

The *Strike Bulletin* of Sunday 2 February introduced a version of events that is now part of the dominant narrative (e.g. Jenkins, 2008, 36; McGonigle & Wood, 2013, 84), that the army was there to crush the strike: 'Apparently, if the workers do not accept what the employers give them, it is to be rammed down their throats at the point of the bayonet'. Although mass picketing was stopped, the strike leaders were in custody on charges relating to the riot, and men began to return to work, the soldiers did not interfere with the right of men to withhold their labour and, indeed, the strike continued until 12 February 1919. McLean has described the structural weakness of the strike, which he believed would have collapsed without any help from the Government, and the *Strike Bulletin's* version of events can be read as perhaps intended to divert responsibility for the looming failure of the strike away from its leaders (McLean, 1999, 135).

### 'Regulation 965'

The *Strike Bulletin* of Monday 10 February 1919 quoted a document it described as 'Regulation 965' from 'Air Ministry Weekly Orders' 'just issued', apparently to demonstrate how ruthless the government was: 'It is undesirable that firing should take place over the heads of rioters or that blank cartridges should be used'.

This document, however, related only to the actions of RAF personnel, with no relevance to the situation in Glasgow, as no airmen were deployed. The nearest equivalent in the King's Regulations for the army then in force bore no resemblance to the quoted text (my comments in square brackets):

972. Care will be taken not to fire on persons separated from the crowd. To fire over the heads of a crowd has the effect of favouring the most daring and guilty [that is, those in the front rank], and of sacrificing the

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

less daring, and even the innocent [who might be standing at the back or behind the crowd].

This misleading reference to 'Regulation 965' was unfortunately given some credibility by its inclusion in Kendall's study (1969, 139) of the origins of British Communism, and it continues to appear (e.g. Damer, 2009).

### **Elements of the narrative established in the writings of the strike leaders and their followers**

'The troops were all raw recruits; Scottish troops were locked in their barracks, in case they joined the strikers; the troops were all English'

William Gallacher seems to have contributed three key elements of the mythology, that: the troops sent to Glasgow were raw recruits; Scottish troops were not used because they might join the strikers (both Gallacher, 1936, 163–4); all the troops were 'from England' (Gallacher, 1966, 120). None of these claims had been included in his account of the events in a pamphlet published soon after (Gallacher, 1920).

Contemporary newspaper photographs showed many men as mature and in middle age (e.g. Figure 3) and the *Daily Record* and the *Manchester Guardian* (both 3 February 1919) mentioned men wearing medal ribbons and with wound stripes, and men hastily gathered from demobilisation camps, having returned from France. These were clearly not 'raw recruits'.

The idea that the battalion at Maryhill might join the demonstrators also arises from Gallacher's 1936 memoir: 'If we had gone [to Maryhill Barracks] we could easily have persuaded the soldiers to come out and Glasgow would have been in our hands' (Gallacher, 1936, 163–4). There is no contemporary evidence for this and it seems to be retrospective wishful thinking.<sup>2</sup> As Macfarlane (1966, 43) wrote in his study of the British Communist Party, '...Gallacher later persisted in the view that the workers were ready to support an uprising in Glasgow ... This confident assertion shows a complete lack of understanding of the political situation at the time'. Gallacher referred to this belief again (1966, 120), which seems to be the first published appearance of the idea that the troops were 'from England': 'The soldiers in Maryhill were confined to barracks, and had they come out there would certainly have been startling events in the city. But while the soldiers were locked in, young conscripts were rushed up from England'.



**Figure 3:**  
**Photograph of Scottish troops (wearing Tam O'Shanter bonnets and Glengarry caps) taking their ease at the City Chambers. The man in the foreground and the two standing at the back are men in middle age. The others are mature men, not 'raw recruits'. (*The Bulletin*, 4 February 1919)**



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The War Cabinet minutes of 30 January make it clear that it was considered less problematic to use Scottish rather than English troops and that instructions were being sent to Scottish Command in Edinburgh to put men on standby, should the Sheriff need to call for aid (TNA CAB 23/9/9, 1919). There was at this time only one English battalion based in Scotland, from the East Surrey Regiment (at Bridge of Allan). Contemporary newspapers described (and published photographs of) kilted men of the Seaforth, Gordon and Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, of the Royal Scots in Glengarry bonnets, and of two

### *'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

English units, the East Surrey Regiment and the Durham Light Infantry (apparently the only unit, apart from the tanks, drawn up from England) (Barclay, 2018a; TNA WO 73/110).

### *'Churchill sent the tanks'*

A development of the 'Government sent the troops' myth is one in which personal blame for the deployment of troops has been assigned to Churchill (e.g. 'takeourblueback', 2018). Although Churchill was Secretary of State for War in 1919, he was not a member of the five-man War Cabinet. Ministers, senior civil servants and senior military officers attended the meetings to contribute on agenda items relating to their responsibilities. At the 30 January meeting the War Cabinet decided (contrary to Churchill's opinion that 'The moment for their use had not arrived'), to make troops available, should they be needed (TNA CAB 23/9/9, 1919).

The idea that Churchill was behind the deployment has, in my search of the sources, not yet been found prior to 1973, when it appeared in one of Manny Shinwell's memoirs (1973, 45). He wrote that: 'Churchill persuaded the Cabinet that troops, machine guns and tanks should be deployed in the Clydeside area ...'. Shinwell offers no evidence for this statement, which contradicts not only the War Cabinet minutes, but also an earlier (1955, 64) autobiography in which he blamed 'Westminster' and two later memoirs (1981, 63; 1984, 93–4) in which he blamed the whole thing (including the deliberate fomenting of the riot) on Lloyd George, as revenge for his humiliation in Glasgow in 1916.

### *The 'howitzer(s)'*

The presence of a 'howitzer', more recently 'howitzers' (e.g. 'karen\_is\_raging', 2018) is not mentioned in any contemporary account.<sup>3</sup> The newspapers and the *Strike Bulletin* documented the presence of tanks and machine guns with relish and outrage respectively, and published photographs of both, and one might have expected a howitzer to be mentioned or photographed, especially as it is frequently reported as having been positioned in front of the main door of the City Chambers. The earliest reference so far found to a howitzer is in McShane's memoir (1978). It has been suggested (MacNeill, pers comm) that 'war trophies – captured German field guns distributed round the country – might have been present in the square on 31 January, and their nature misinterpreted; at least one such a gun (apparently a 10.5cm 'Felhaubitze')

*Gordon J. Barclay*

was allocated to the city (*Daily Record* 4 October 1918) and subsequently photographed in situ in George Square (*Daily Mail & Record* of 21 December 1918).

### **The ‘rebirth in the traditions of Red Clydeside’**

The radical left tradition, as it exists today, was created between the late 1960s and the early 1980s as a fusion between socialism and nationalism (Scothorne pers comm; Gall, 2005; Scotthorne, 2018). While Red Clydeside frequently appeared in the political rhetoric, specific references to the events of 31 January 1919 seem rare in this period. An exception is the front cover (a photograph of the tanks in their Cattle Market depot) and editorial of issue no. 1 of the socialist/nationalist magazine *Calgacus* in 1975: ‘It is over 50 years since the tanks rolled into Glasgow and the state deployed the military against striking workers’.

Prominent figures in the development of the radical left played a part in the spread of two of the myths, those relating to the ‘English troops’ and the ‘raw recruits’. Both appeared in a biography of John MacLean published in 1973, by MacLean’s daughter, Nan MacLean Milton. Milton was prominent in the John MacLean Society, which at that time was promoting readings of politics and history which fed into a broader tendency for historical memorialisation on the nationalist/socialist left in the 1970s (Scothorne, pers comm). Thus, the period saw not so much the use of the events of the ‘Battle’, but the revival of the symbolic value of Red Clydeside for a modern socialist and nationalist narrative.

### **Elements of the mythology established in the last two decades or so**

By the mid-1990s the main elements of the essentially mythical narrative had been established, but since then further elaborations have been added.

‘This was the action of an “English” Government/  
an “English invasion”’

The myth of the ‘Englishness’ of the force deployed has now been extended in nationalist narratives to the deployment being the action of an ‘English government’ or an ‘English invasion’: ‘Today is the 99th anniversary of

*‘Churchill rolled the tanks ...’*

when England invaded Scotland as Churchill sent the tanks in to stop a “socialist revolution” in Glasgow, with Scottish soldiers locked in barracks’ (Coyle, 2017).

Leaving aside the fact that the UK government did not ‘send the troops’, the characterisation of the War Cabinet as ‘English’ is in error. The 30 January meeting of the War Cabinet was attended by three of its members, of whom two, including the Deputy Prime Minister, Andrew Bonar Law (a Glasgow MP) in the chair, were Scots. Of the other civilians present, seven out of 12 were Scots (TNA CAB 23/9/9 1919). On the next day, the 31st, both members of the War Cabinet present were Scots. Of the 11 civilians present, seven were Scots (TNA CAB 23/9/10). Finally, at the meeting on 30 January Bonar Law had made it clear that, ‘The first responsibility in the whole matter must be by the Secretary of Scotland’, who set up a four-man sub-committee chaired by himself, with two other Scots (the Minister of Labour – another Glasgow MP – and the Advocate General) and General Childs. The Sheriff of Lanarkshire, who actually called the army in, was, of course, a Scot. On social media it is often stated, however, that these were, ‘so called Scots’, not ‘actual Scots’ (McEwan, 2018).

‘The soldiers and/or tanks were sent into George Square and fought with the crowd/shot at the crowd/injured or killed people’

A recent invention, mainly online, is that the troops, and especially the tanks, not only appeared in George Square during the riot, but injured or even killed people. For example: ‘The Battle of George Square saw scores of workers seriously injured when troops opened fire on their own citizens’ (‘travisbynight’, 2018); ‘Churchill sent the tanks to mow down tens of thousands protesting in George Square, Glasgow ...’ (Macfarlane, M., 2017)<sup>4</sup>; ‘Battle of George Square Glasgow, 1919 Churchill’s troop & tanks fire on 60,000 strikers’ (Torry, 2013); ‘At least 34 [dead] in George Square...’ (Blair, 2018).

The strikers’ own newspaper, however, and the wider press all reported the arrival of the first troops around 10pm on the evening of Friday 31 January, after the violence in George Square was over (*Glasgow Herald*; *Daily Record*; *Strike Bulletin*, all 01 February 1919), and the arrival of the tanks on Monday 03 February (*Aberdeen Daily Journal*; *The Bulletin*; *Daily Record*, *Strike Bulletin*, all 04 February 1919). The tanks seem not have left their temporary depot. Thus, there was no confrontation between troops and demonstrators, and consequently no injuries or deaths at the hands of the soldiers.

**‘The crowd in George Square was 80,000, 90,000 or 100,000 strong’**

In recent decades the reported size of the crowd in George Square has grown. A figure of 20–25,000 was reported in newspapers at the time and William Gallacher himself used the figure of 20,000 in his cross-examination of the Chief Constable at his own trial (NRS JC 36/31; *Manchester Guardian & Scotsman*, both 01 February 1919). This figure was also used in Slowe’s authorised biography of Shinwell (1993, 84). Kendall, however, in his history of the Communist Party of Great Britain, claimed 30,000 (1969, 138); Shinwell, in one memoir (1984, 90), claimed 80,000. The Glasgow Digital Library (2002) used the figure ‘upwards of 60,000’ and this is the number generally used in recent newspaper accounts and on social media. The figure of 90,000 appeared in editions of two Scottish school history textbooks (Kerr, 2010, 107; McGonigle & Wood, 2013, 84). Two general histories of Scotland have quoted the size of the crowd as ‘more than’ or ‘around’ 100,000’ (Lynch, 1991, 425; Devine, 2007, ebook 811.7–813.5/1763).

None of these publications specify a source for their figures. Foster noted a Ministry of Munitions document dated 01 February 1919 which included the statement, ‘Almost 60,000 strikers assembled this morning outside the Municipal Chambers. The strikers have come into collision with the police’. The file, however, provides no source for the figure (Foster, 1990, 57)<sup>5</sup> In his *Rolling of the Thunder*, Gallacher (1947, 51) refers to the largest and smallest political demonstrations he had led; the largest being ‘over 100,000’ and the smallest ‘about 100 followers’; the larger figure probably refers to the 31 January 1919 demonstration, but the ‘100,000/100’ comparison suggests mere rhetorical neatness. If one measures the size of George Square, applies the Jacobs Formula (Jacobs, 1967) for estimating the size of crowds, and considers the bunching and density of the crowd shown in contemporary photographs and cine film, there seems little reason to doubt the contemporary estimate of 20–25,000; 60,000 would have been a tight squeeze.

## **The spread of the mythology**

By the turn of the century, therefore, the mythologised narrative was fully developed. The force was supposedly:

- sent by the government;
- sent to ‘crush’ the strike;

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

- made up of raw recruits;
- from England/made up of English troops; because Scottish troops were locked in their barracks as unreliable; sent by Churchill

and, since the 1990s:

- was sent by an 'English Government', or was an 'English invasion';
- people were injured/killed by troops and tanks in the square during the riot;
- the crowd was up to 100,000 strong.

It is this suite of myths, sometimes elaborated, and frequently promoted using images unrelated to Glasgow or the year 1919, which is repeated, in history books, newspapers, on the internet or on social media, to present a dramatised image of working class struggle and to support narratives of oppression and grievance.

## Historical Texts

Academic textbooks telling a wider Scottish story, or the history of labour relations often pass over the 'Battle' in a few sentences. In academic accounts, the military deployment has generally been treated as a coda to the 'Battle of George Square', itself merely a dramatic interruption to the history of labour relations, requiring no more than a mention (e.g. Pittock, 2001, 103; Devine, 2012, ebook 811.7–813.5/1763): the troops just 'arrive', 'sent by government', to deal with 'a Bolshevik rising'. Even historians of the role of the army in supporting the civil power have shown little interest (e.g. Jeffery & Hennessy, 1983, 10; Weinberger, 1990, 152–62).

More popular books telling the story of, for example, Red Clydeside, or the modern history of Glasgow, emphasise the dramatic story of the strike, demonstration and military deployment, but generally rely on earlier secondary sources and unfortunately incorporate their errors. In *When the Clyde Ran Red* Craig (2011, 165) follows the accepted narrative, that 'It's part of the romance of the story that the troops who marched in with [the tanks] were young English conscripts, it being thought too risky to deploy Scottish troops in Maryhill Barracks'. Naughton, in *Glasgow's East End* (2014, 91–4), goes further, claiming that there was (my emphasis), '... a police baton frenzy, followed by armed troops storming the square and the deployment of tanks and a howitzer ...', and that 10,000 troops from England were sent by the 'English' Government (who met a battalion of Seaforth Highlanders from Aberdeen!). Then, 'Six tanks, at least one howitzer and an army of foot soldiers marched

through the square with bayonets fixed' and in the middle of this commotion, 'a lone sheriff took out a copy of the Riot Act'. Finally, the story was repeated (apparently originating in the *Scotland on Sunday* newspaper of 4 October 2009), that Manny Shinwell 'had faced down a hostile army tank in George Square', presumably like the lone figure in Tiananmen Square. Shinwell had been in police custody for three days by the time the tanks arrived.

Fry, in his recent history of Glasgow (2017, 320, 429), states that, 'It fell to the secretary of state for war, Winston Churchill, to take decisive action of a kind he always relished'. This was not the case, as already noted. He includes the problematic 'howitzer' and Gallacher's myth of the English troops, preferred because 'the government feared Scots regiments might go over to the workers'.

## Blogs and other online resources

There is a handful of online resources and blogs which are the most frequently referenced in support of claims about 1919, both in books and, especially, on social media. They rarely provide references for what they say and they contain many inaccuracies.

The 'Urban Glasgow' website gives a generally accurate picture of the events leading up to the violence, but introduces the 'young and inexperienced English troops' myth (repeating it in three different forms in seven lines) as well as a doubtful statement about 'howitzers' (plural) (Urban Glasgow, 2008). In common with a number of other blogs, it then quotes 'Regulation 965', already described – an irrelevant RAF document.

The site 'On this day in Scotland' includes a page on "'Bloody Friday" – the Battle of George Square'. It includes a selection of the myths: 'as many as 90,000 were present'; 'Home Secretary, [sic] Winston Churchill, sent 10,000 soldiers armed with machine guns and a 4.5 Inch howitzer to Glasgow'. The irrelevant 'Regulation 965' appears and Churchill is blamed for the troops being kept in Maryhill Barracks; it does note, however, that the 'English troops' story is not backed up by evidence ('ianthepict', 2011).

Caltonjock's blog (2016) on the events of 1919 is one of the more problematic. It includes a fair number of myths in the title alone, with an unequivocal reference to the Unionist campaign slogan 'better together', thus:

1919 – Westminster Placed Scottish Troops on Lock-Down in Their Barracks – Illegally Deployed An English Battle Group to Scotland and Established Martial Law Against Defenceless Scots in Glasgow. Are we Really Better Together?

*‘Churchill rolled the tanks ...’*

The relatively brief document contains the word ‘English’ ten times, to drive that point home, and also mentions the dubious ‘howitzer’. The misrepresentation of two images (of events in the First World War and in 1921), as depicting events in 1919, is dealt with below.

The source that is perhaps cited most frequently on-line is the Glasgow Digital Library (GDL) page on the ‘Battle’ (Glasgow Digital Library, 2002). The GDL was created around 2002 at the University of Strathclyde as part of the Research Support Libraries Programme, to present original material in digitised form, and within a historical context. The supposed unreliability of the troops at Maryhill is extended to cover all Scots troops:

An estimated 10,000 English troops in total were sent to Glasgow in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of George Square. This was in spite of a full battalion of Scottish soldiers being stationed at Maryhill barracks in Glasgow at the time. No Scottish troops were deployed, with the government fearing that fellow Scots, soldiers or otherwise, would go over to the workers [sic] side if a revolutionary situation developed in Glasgow.

The site does not quote its sources and enquiries shed no light on them. The pages are no longer updated and are hosted both on the site of the Scottish Cultural Resources Network (part of Historic Environment Scotland) and on the University of Strathclyde website.

The website of the Scottish Government agency, Education Scotland, contained (up to at least November 2018) an educational resource titled ‘The Road to the Scottish Parliament’ (Education Scotland, 1999) (my emphases):

In an event unique in British history, Winston Churchill dispatched English troops and tanks against a large demonstration in George Square on 31st January 1919. The event became known as The Battle of George Square. Scottish troops already present in Glasgow were locked in Maryhill Barracks for fear that they might join the demonstrators and precipitate a major revolution. Thousands of English troops remained in Scotland for many months.

There are six statements here (underlined) which either cannot be evidenced, or can easily be disproved.

## Newspapers

The story of the Battle turns up occasionally in newspaper accounts. They are subsequently referenced on social media in support of a range of dubious



assertions. For example the *Sunday Post* of 1 October 2015 in its 'Scotland's Iconic Moments' section repeated a number of myths: the '10,000 English troops'; 'Winston Churchill – then Secretary of State for War – was said to have made the decision to send in the army'; 'No Scottish soldiers were deployed, as the Government feared some might go over to the workers' side'. The *Daily Record*, which did so much in 1919 to record accurately what had happened, clearly did not consult its own archives when, on 24 January 2009 (revised 1 July 2012), it reported that 'Fearful that local regiments would support the strikers, about 10,000 soldiers were sent by train from England overnight'.

On 29 January 2018 the *Herald* published an article telling the real story of the 'Julian' photo (on which, see below), and in passing scotching the 'English soldiers' myth (Leadbetter, 2018). In response, a columnist in the *National* newspaper (31 January 2018) wrote that (my emphasis):

The existence of English soldiers being sent to crush rebellious socialist Scots has been decried as yet another myth nurtured by modern nationalists in search of a grievance. However, no-one has claimed that all the soldiers were English, only that some of them were.

The underlined statement is not the case; the sources already quoted or five minutes' search online show this.

## Social Media

The myths are now most frequently deployed on social media, usually with an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-British or anti-English aim.

Posts appear most often around the anniversary of the events. In 2017, however, there was a flurry after violence on the streets of Catalonia during their independence referendum, and these have continued since, drawing parallels between what happened in 1919 (Cumming, 2018) and, in a few cases, what 'Scotland might expect' if it did the same ('T1978Derek', 2018).

I have measured the frequency of the appearance on Twitter of relevant posts containing three out of many possible search terms. The searches were made in early January 2018 and cover the period up to December 2017. The charts also record the earliest date on which the search term was found.

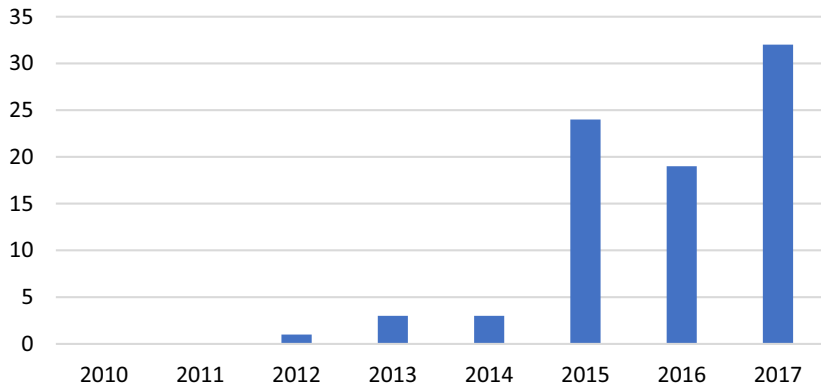
The spike in references to 'English troops' in 2014 may be interpreted as reflecting a 'grievance' strand of campaigning for the Scottish independence referendum in that year (Barclay, 2017).

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

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**Figure 4:**  
**Chart showing occurrences of the search term 'Churchill troops Glasgow' on Twitter, 2010–17**

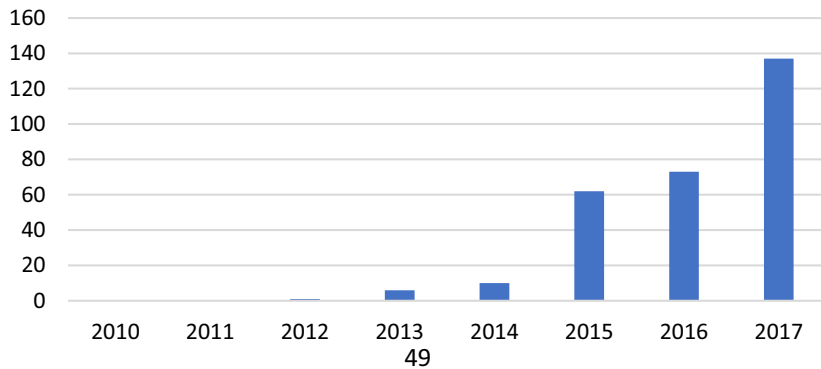
Twitter: 'Churchill troops Glasgow'.  
Earliest occurrence 26/12/2012



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**Figure 5:**  
**Chart showing occurrences of the search term 'Churchill tanks Glasgow' on Twitter, 2010–17**

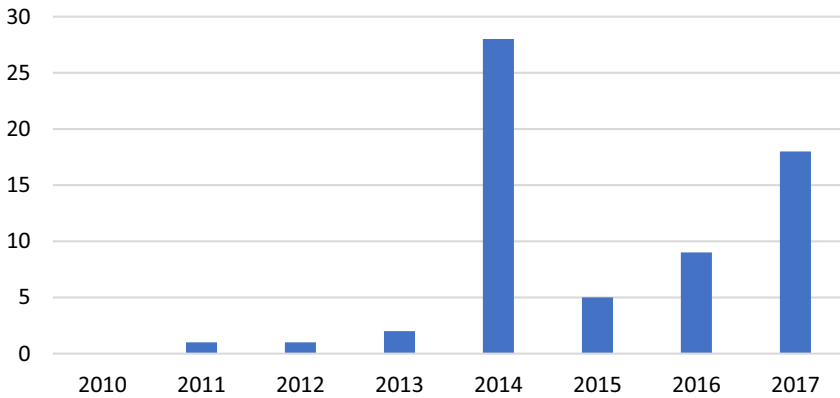
Twitter: 'Churchill tanks Glasgow'.  
Earliest occurrence 7/01/2012



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**Figure 6:**  
**Chart showing occurrences of the search term 'English troops Glasgow'**  
**on Twitter, 2010–17**

Twitter: 'English troops Glasgow'.  
Earliest occurrence 27/11/2011



The fluid nature of myths makes them ripe for elaboration, especially on social media. Elaboration occurs when someone believes that the causes of or consequences of a 'fact' (even if untrue) can be inferred, and then presented as 'facts' themselves. For example, if one believes that Churchill 'sent tanks into George Square', then the aim must have been to attack the crowd and the consequence *must* have been that people were injured by them. Thus, one Twitter poster felt comfortable with adding this elaboration ('yona1959', 2017):

My granny was born in 1894. Fecking rode a tank in George Sq in 1919. So many women as well as men beaten up by Churchill's Butchers. The Scottish Regiments were locked in their barracks in Maryhill. Scottish soldiers wouldn't have had women folk beaten up!

The supposed parallel<sup>6</sup> with Tiananmen Square in 1989 (tanks + demonstrators) has not been overlooked:

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

Funny how people criticise Tiananmen Square, when Churchill did the same in 1919 in George Square – tanks & all. ('radioclashblogd', 2015)

## Images

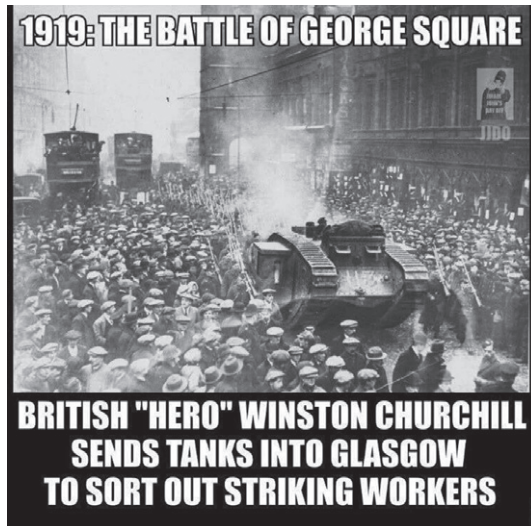
Images have very frequently been used to add impact to posts about the events of George Square. Some are, however, from different years and places, and are used either deliberately or inadvertently to misrepresent the events

The most frequently-appearing image, in books, newspapers, a TV programme and on social media, is that of a tank surrounded by a crowd (the 'Julian' photograph, Figure 1) which is portrayed as a tank on its way to oppress the demonstrators on 31 January 1919, but is in reality of a fund-raising parade in Glasgow, on 14 January 1918 (Leadbetter, 2018). On social media the 'Julian' photo has often been captioned inaccurately and occasionally intemperately, as in the example illustrated in Figure 7.

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**Figure 7:**

**An annotated version of the 1918 'Julian' photograph, accompanied by the text: 'On this day in 1919 that animal Churchill told his troops to fix bayonets as he ordered them onto the streets of Glasgow ('hoopy\_hound\_dug', 2017)**



The publication of the proof has not, however, stopped the frequent misrepresentation of the image (e.g. 'haggisnwhisky', 2018).

The other most commonly-used graphic on social media, especially on Facebook, has been a composite one, of which Figure 8 is typical.

Starting at top right, there is the 1918 photo of 'Julian'. The middle right photograph is an image of the demonstration in George Square. At bottom right is a photograph of the tanks that actually were deployed, in their depot in the Cattle Market. The main photo shows the prone strike leader Kirkwood, after being struck by a police baton.

The most misleading image yet found on 'Battle propaganda' is on a pro-independence Facebook page, posted in August 2015 ('YesLivingston2', 2015): 'When Prime Minister [not in 1919] Winston Churchill sent tanks and troops to Glasgow Square [sic] to suppress the Scots'. (Figure 9) Into the typical composite graphic is inserted (middle of bottom row) an image showing over 20 dead bodies. The image in fact shows Russian dead after the Battle of Bolimów on the eastern front on 31 January 1915. It would seem that the image was grabbed hastily by someone trawling for George Square images, from a website which lists events that happened on the same day in different years, in this case 31 January (Pogues Forums, 31 January 2013). On that site the Bolimów image sits just above the 'George Square' entry, and is poorly differentiated from it.

In the Caltonjock blog, already referenced, two images are claimed to be of events in 1919, but are not. The first shows a line of buses captioned, 'English soldiers being transported to Glasgow 1919'. It is in fact a widely-used photograph in the collection of both the London Transport Museum and the Australian National Media Museum showing London buses being used to transport men of an Australian division to the western front, during the First World War (Taylor, 2014).

The second is a posed photograph of seated soldiers between two tanks, captioned, 'English soldiers posing with their tanks Glasgow 1919'. It is in fact of Tank Corps men and vehicles at Maryhill Barracks in 1921. The caption of the photograph, in the Lafayette Archive (Lafayette Negative Archive, ND) does make an assumption that these tanks had stayed in Glasgow long after February 1919, but they are of a completely different type (Mark V, 1918 pattern, rather than the Medium C type deployed in 1919). Sections of tanks maintained specifically in case of civil unrest in the UK were recorded on 18 March 1919 as having been established at Edinburgh, Liverpool, Cannock Chase and Catterick: none were recorded in Glasgow (TNA WO 73/18920, 1919). The Tank Corps was, of course, no more 'English' than the Royal Artillery.

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

**Figure 8:**  
**Composite image of the kind frequently used on social media. The caption is not untypical: the 'Tories' and 'England' are blamed for what happened**



The mythology has now been incorporated into a comic-book picture history titled *Fight the Power*: 'Fearing the Scottish soldiers to be sympathetic to the local workers the government brought up soldiers, tanks and machine guns from England' (Wilson & Dickson, 2013, 103). The statement, 'The soldiers eventually squashed the revolt ...' rather over-eggs the pudding, as there was no revolt. The book includes a particularly misleading drawing, of men shaking their fists at a tank resembling 'Julian', the fund-raising tank of 1918.

## The trajectory of the myths

The development and spread of some elements of the mythology can be tracked to some extent, although it is certain that other staging points remain to be found. Here I explore two: the 'English troops' and 'Churchill sent the tanks' myths.

After the first recorded appearance of the 'English troops' myth in Gallacher's 1966 memoir (above), it reappeared in two biographies of John Maclean,

**Figure 9:**  
**The YES Livingston Facebook post with (centre, bottom) the Russian dead in the Battle of Bolimów, represented as the 'victims' of George Square**



both published in 1973. Nan Maclean Milton, in her biography of her father, wrote:

Throughout the night trainloads of young English soldiers had been brought to the city – young lads of nineteen or so who had no idea of where they were or why they were there. The authorities dare not use the Scottish soldiers billeted at Maryhill Barracks, in case they turned round and supported the strikers.

(Milton, 1973, 191)

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

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**Figure 10:**

**Captioned: 'English soldiers being transported to Glasgow 1919', but actually a famous photograph of London buses transporting Allied troops to the Western Front during the First World War (National Media Museum)**



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John Broom's biography of Maclean, published in the same year, and dedicated to Nan Milton, and possibly based on material provided by her, puts it:

Significantly most of the soldiers were English, who had little idea of what the struggle was all about. The authorities did not dare to call upon the Scottish soldiers in nearby Maryhill barracks lest they had a mutiny on their hands.

(Broom, 1973, 120–1)

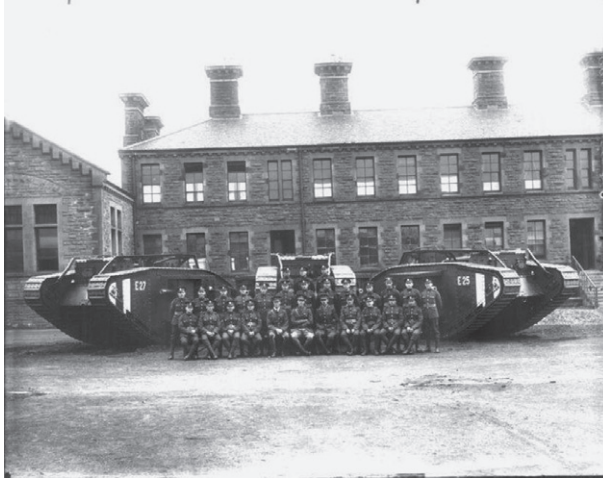
These quotations seem likely to be the inspiration of an account published in 1993 or 1994 by Scottish Militant Labour, a forerunner of the (current) Scottish Socialist Party.: 'Instead, the government used young and inexperienced English troops ...' (Cameron, 1994, 22). Cameron's phrase was subsequently quoted on four web pages, unattributed: two in June 2008 on the Urban Glasgow and Hidden Glasgow websites; Iain Lundy's 'Eye Spy Glasgow' column in the *Evening Times* of (28 November 2014); the 'Howff' Wordpress blog (1 March 2015).

The 'English troops' myth was included on the Glasgow Digital Library page on the 'Battle' (2002) and then in the *Glasgow Guardian* of 21 January 2009 (Sherry & Beynon, 2009). It has since re-entered traditional published media, in



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**Figure 11:**  
**Captioned: 'English soldiers posing with their tanks Glasgow 1919', but actually tanks of the Royal Tank Corps in Glasgow in 1921 (Lafayette collection)**



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educational material, including school textbooks published in 2010 and 2013, on television and in Fry's recent history of Glasgow (2017), all already referenced above.

As already noted, the 'Churchill sent the troops' element of the myth seems to appear first in Manny Shinwell's autobiography (1973, 45), *I've lived through it all*, in which he wrote, 'Churchill persuaded the Cabinet that troops, machine guns, and tanks should be deployed in the Clydeside area ...'. Shinwell does not provide a source for this assertion and no evidence for it has been found.

In her study of the use of the military in civil disturbances in the UK, Weinberger (1990, 152–62) works from the long-established socialist-conspiracist premise (c.f. Gallacher, 1936, 160; Bell, 1941, 167) that the government deliberately engineered the military intervention in Glasgow without involving the local authorities, and that the riot 'simply provided the necessary trigger for the anti-strike measures agreed by the cabinet ...'. Neither this, nor her claim that Churchill was the one who made 'a positive proposal [to

*'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

use troops] which was the one adopted', are supported by the War Cabinet minutes. A key point in her argument is the supposed lack of involvement of the Lord Provost in prior discussions about military aid; it is likely that the evidence from the trial transcript (NRS JC36/31, cross-examination of Sheriff Mackenzie) was not accessible in 1990, which records the fact that the Sheriff had indeed made prior contact with the government to check that troops would be available for him to call upon.

A version of the Churchill myth surfaced in Burrowes' *Great Glasgow Stories* (2010, ebook reference 629.5/640): (my emphasis):

He [Churchill] did say, however, the War Office would take all necessary steps to meet any eventuality and arrangements would be made for troop movements to Glasgow. Churchill's orders were acted on and men in various barracks throughout Scotland gathered their battle gear and made ready for a new front line...the city of Glasgow.

The War Cabinet minutes, however, actually recorded:

Mr Churchill said that the War Office would take all the necessary steps to meet such eventuality [possible strike-related disorganisation of rail traffic, which Sir Eric Geddes had just warned him of], and would consider arrangements for placing troops in the vicinity of Glasgow.

That is, the eventuality was very specific, the potential disruption of any deployment by a rail strike, not 'all eventualities'; and the troops were to be put 'in the vicinity of Glasgow', so that they could be called upon if necessary, not following 'Churchill's orders' 'to Glasgow'.

That 'Churchill sent the tanks ...' is now the most common way in which the George Square stories are deployed on social media.

## Challenging the myths

'...it was Churchill that sent troops into Glasgow now f\*\*k off'  
(my asterisks)

(Forbes, 2018)

A number of people have challenged aspects of the mythology (e.g. 'A Thousand Flowers', 2016). In 2018 the *Herald* published two articles about George Square, one of which (Leadbetter, 2018) has already been mentioned. The other 'debunked' more of the myths (Barclay, 2018b). The 'comments' posted below both articles show the grip of the mythology.

In February 2018 Dr Ewan Gibbs published a critique of the way the legend of the Battle had been 'rewritten for contemporary circumstances', noting the shift of emphasis from a narrative of class struggle, to one of English oppression (Gibbs, 2018).

Challenges to the mythology on social media, some of which can be found by clicking on the Twitter and Facebook links in this paper, meet with a varied response: silence; thanks for pointing the facts out; immediate blocking; accusations of being a 'yoon' (Unionist) stooge of the Westminster government paid to spread disinformation; personal abuse, suggestions I move to England, and an absolute refusal to consider evidence that contradicts strongly-held beliefs: the characteristics of 'motivated reasoning' (Kunda, 1990).

## **Conclusion**

Much of what is widely believed and written about the events of 31 January and the following days is simply not true. But, a frequent response to evidence-based challenges to the mythology is that it is 'victors' history'. Although presented as the 'victors' on 31 January, the UK government has been the loser in historical terms for the last century: the socialist narrative has had no real challenge. Ironically, the military intervention, for which no blame is attached to the city's own administration, which actually called it in, 'gave the strike a romantic history which successfully cancelled an otherwise ignominious failure' (McLean, 1999, 138).

At the time of writing it remains to be seen whether the various planned centenary commemorations are of something resembling the historical reality; it would surely be a betrayal of the real achievements of 'Red Clydeside' if a scuffle near the end of a failing strike became its lasting memorial.

## **Notes**

1. The imposition of martial law means that the military take control of functions normally run by the civil authorities, and possibly also subject the civilian population to military law.
2. Contrary to widespread belief Maryhill barracks was, in January 1919, occupied not by the Highland Light Infantry, but by a reserve Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers (1,475 men), the 'county regiment' of Ayrshire, the south-west and the western Borders. There were only 72 men of the Highland Light Infantry at Maryhill, in a battalion being disbanded. (TNA WO 73/110)
3. A howitzer (often specified as a 4.5-inch howitzer) is a piece of field artillery designed for 'indirect fire', firing a shell high in the air, over obstacles between the gun and target.

### *'Churchill rolled the tanks ...'*

4. The same poster tweeted the 'tanks sent into George Square in 1926 [sic]' myth 11 times between October 2016 and May 2018, when she blocked me.
5. The exact quotation does not appear in the article, but has been kindly provided by John Foster. MUN 5/18 'Organisation of the Ministry of Munitions', '1 February Area report' (The National Archives, Kew).
6. The death toll in Tiananmen Square was somewhere between 500 and 1000. There were no tanks and no-one died in George Square.

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*Gordon J. Barclay*

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**Your short guide to the EUP Journals**  
Blog <http://euppublishingblog.com/>

***A forum for discussions relating to  
[Edinburgh University Press Journals](#)***



**EDINBURGH**  
University Press

## **1. The primary goal of the EUP Journals Blog**

To aid discovery of authors, articles, research, multimedia and reviews published in Journals, and as a consequence contribute to increasing traffic, usage and citations of journal content.

## **2. Audience**

Blog posts are written for an educated, popular and academic audience within EUP Journals' publishing fields.

## **3. Content criteria - your ideas for posts**

We prioritize posts that will feature highly in search rankings, that are shareable and that will drive readers to your article on the EUP site.

## **4. Word count, style, and formatting**

- Flexible length, however typical posts range 70-600 words.
- Related images and media files are encouraged.
- No heavy restrictions to the style or format of the post, but it should best reflect the content and topic discussed.

## **5. Linking policy**

- Links to external blogs and websites that are related to the author, subject matter and to EUP publishing fields are encouraged, e.g. to related blog posts

## **6. Submit your post**

Submit to [ruth.allison@eup.ed.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.allison@eup.ed.ac.uk)

If you'd like to be a regular contributor, then we can set you up as an author so you can create, edit, publish, and delete your *own* posts, as well as upload files and images.

## **7. Republishing/repurposing**

Posts may be re-used and re-purposed on other websites and blogs, but a minimum 2 week waiting period is suggested, and an acknowledgement and link to the original post on the EUP blog is requested.

## **8. Items to accompany post**

- A short biography (ideally 25 words or less, but up to 40 words)
- A photo/headshot image of the author(s) if possible.
- Any relevant, thematic images or accompanying media (podcasts, video, graphics and photographs), provided copyright and permission to republish has been obtained.
- Files should be high resolution and a maximum of 1GB
- Permitted file types: *jpg, jpeg, png, gif, pdf, doc, ppt, odt, pptx, docx, pps, ppsx, xls, xlsx, key, mp3, m4a, wav, ogg, zip, ogv, mp4, m4v, mov, wmv, avi, mpg, 3gp, 3g2*.