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Review of *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War* by Christopher Phillips

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## REVIEWS

variety is, of course, inevitable. Some chapters cover longer periods of time (Crawford's on the New Zealand Wars is the obvious example here). Some cover conflicts that were larger in scale and are the subject of a vast literature: Peers' chapter on the Revolt of 1857 and Miller's on the South African War come to mind here. Other chapters cover wars on which relatively little is written in English: as Ian Beckett notes, the Third Anglo-Burmese War has been little studied (p.222). Indeed, the interesting variety of the conflicts presented together here may help to redress such imbalances. Obviously, there are limitations on space, and so some battles and campaigns do not make the cut; but the editorial choices here make sense. It is worth noting that the Revolt of 1857, the New Zealand Wars, the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the Anglo-Zulu War, the Sudanese Campaign of 1884-85, the Third Anglo-Burmese War, Tirah, and the South African War of 1899-1902 are additions to what was covered in the Bond volume.

What these chapters do, then, is provide a 'way in' that one hopes will lead to further enquiry. Overall, this volume is a welcome addition to the historiography. It will be immensely useful for students studying courses on the history of the Victorian era British Empire, and will be especially helpful for students looking at the military history of the period. Moreover, Miller concludes by noting the hope that the book 'will have opened up new questions and debates' (p.311). The book shows how much our understanding of Victoria's wars has grown since Bond's volume came out in 1967; but it also shows that there is still plenty of room for fresh perspectives.

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**Christopher Phillips, *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War*. London: University of London Press, 2020. 444 pp. ISBN 978-1909646902 (hardback). Price £50.**

Logistics and transportation during war often make for rather dull reading, especially when academic studies underestimate the human element imperative to its success. However, this is where *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War* deviates. Christopher Phillips has produced an accessible and compelling monograph that examines how British transport specialists were 'redirected [during the First World War] from the pursuit of profits towards the production of military power' (p. 372). Drawing on years of pre-war experience, as well as established

operating practises and procedures, these men enhanced and refined transport infrastructures across the principal theatres of war.

To achieve this, Phillips focuses on three main areas: Britain's preparation for war; the expansion of the British war effort on the Western Front between August 1914 and October 1916; and the globalisation of the conflict, as well as the British army's response to the increasing ferocity of industrial warfare from January 1917 onwards. Mining a rich vein of archival material, including government memorandum, parliamentary records and personal papers, along with a broad range of post-war literature, including autobiographical accounts and transport histories, Phillips offers a nuanced yet balanced examination of a contentious and misunderstood element of the First World War.

His main contention is that far from 'reluctantly [engaging] with the myriad talents and abilities prevalent in Britain's sophisticated industrial economy' (p. 5), the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) instead valued the abilities of the civilian specialists, leveraging modern business techniques to their advantage. Phillips rightly emphasises the longstanding relationship that existed between British transport companies and the state as early as 1830, thereby demonstrating the longevity of civil-military relations. Of particular interest is the fact that such collaboration though advantageous in general was not always fruitful. A lack of alternatives to the 'with France' (WF) scheme formulated between 1910–14, 'constrained the government's freedom of action' (p. 91). Likewise, South-Eastern and Chatham Railway (SECR) operators at the port of Boulogne, proved incapable of servicing Britain's expanding continental commitment, forcing military authorities to intervene. The author also demonstrates that though critical to the prosecution and success of British operations, these specialists were often problematic individuals, lacking the requisite tact and sensitivities required when cooperating with senior British commanders and their French counterparts. Sir Eric Geddes, for example – architect of the BEF's transport infrastructure on the Western Front – 'struggled to adapt to the requirements of diplomacy and conciliation upon which coalition warfare depended' (p. 295). By situating transportation within the wider context of coalition strategic planning, *Civilian Specialists* expands on research conducted by scholars such as William Philpott and Elisabeth Greenhalgh into the Entente and Allied military alliance. This is an important consideration and acknowledges that the First World War was a 'war of coalitions'.

It is important to note that Phillips similarly emphasises the unquestionable success of these men in refining transport infrastructures globally, including the establishment of the Cherbourg-Taranto line, intended to convey passengers and goods between the Western Front and the Italian Front. Though it 'did not achieve the ambitious targets set for it' (p. 289), he identifies, the line did however, afford an alternative to the perilous sea voyage, reducing casualties and providing opportunities for leave. This is

## REVIEWS

a significant point that is often overlooked within studies of logistics, that efficacious transport infrastructures provided a bilateral channel for supplies in one direction and the evacuation of wounded servicemen in the other. The author, in fact, demonstrates throughout how divergent forms of transportation, including inland waterway transport (IWT), eased congestion and enabled the conveyance of men to the rear without obstructing the provision of munitions. Understanding the organisation and management of this infrastructure throws light on the treatment of and contemporary attitudes towards the wounded, further revising modern interpretations of British commanders as callous and unsympathetic.

Finding fault in this otherwise detailed, comprehensive and stimulating monograph is difficult. One area for further exploration is the transport arrangements that were undertaken for the demobilisation of the armed forces and the role of Britain's civilian specialists following the Armistice. Such research remains neglected within the Anglophone historiography and would have supplemented Phillips' illuminating examination of the pre-war WF scheme and the contribution of these men to the mobilisation of the BEF in August 1914. However, given the range and depth of *Civilian Specialists*, omission of these arrangements and the period was doubtless a consequence of time and a word-count rather than academic oversight.

Notwithstanding these minor reservations and reviewer bias, *Civilian Specialists* is an important contribution to historiographical discussions concerning transportation and the difficulties of coalition strategic planning throughout the First World War. By evaluating logistics through the lens of prominent transport specialists, Phillips broadens our understanding of the complexities of industrial warfare and the nuanced relationships that manifest. This engaging and thought-provoking monograph is essential for those interested in logistics generally as well as those interested in the men who shaped, organised and enhanced Britain's transport infrastructure on the Western Front, in Palestine, Salonika and Sinai.

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**Nick Lloyd, *The Western Front: A History of the First World War*. London: Viking, 2021. xxiv + Index + Notes + Bibliography + 657pp. ISBN: 978-0241347164 (hardback). Price £25.**

*The Western Front* is an imposing work of what might be termed traditional military history. It is focussed on key commanders and views war through the prism of their