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Review of *The Western Front: A History of the First World War* by Nick Lloyd

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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

decision making. There is some consideration of the wider politics of the conflict but for the most part the focus is firmly upon the events on the battlefield. A brisk narrative carries the reader through the war of movement in 1914, the bloody stalemate of 1915, the earth-shaking clashes at Verdun, the Somme and Ypres in 1916-17, and the final Allied advance to victory in the Hundred Days in 1918. The casualties involved in these battles continue to astound and there is a risk that a reader will be left numbed by the staggering statistics. Lloyd avoids this danger by providing just enough quotation from the front lines to remind us that the decisions of the generals had profound consequences for the men that they commanded.

When studying the war, Lloyd provides a grand narrative rather than a detailed point-by-point analysis or 'abstract theorising or lengthy commentaries on differing interpretations' as noted in the introduction to the book. This stands in contrast to his earlier volumes such as *Loos 1915* and *Passchendaele* but is perhaps inevitable given the greater scale of his current work. Yet this does not mean that the volume lacks depth. To a keen-eyed reader Lloyd's analysis and assessment is revealed by the lines of argument which he puts forward. For example, he views the performance of the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 in a much more favourable light than the line taken by Max Hastings in *Catastrophe* and inclines towards the viewpoint, advanced by Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson and Paul Harris amongst others, that Haig's influence during the planning process for the Battle of the Somme made a major contribution to the disaster on 1 July 1916.

Lloyd's analysis is anchored on his source material. His research for the volume is worthy of praise. The historiography of the First World War has grown exponentially in recent years. Lloyd's research shows a thorough grasp of the keystones of First World War history in national archives, official histories, memoirs and contemporary or near-contemporary accounts. To this is added a valuable selection of the specialist literature that has emerged in the last twenty years. Of particular note is Lloyd's ability to draw upon English language studies of French and German commanders, notably the work of Elizabeth Greenhalgh on French command and Jonathan Boff on German leadership. When combined with Lloyd's work in relevant national archives it allows the author to present a broad narrative that considers the multi-national nature of the war in the depth which it deserves.

Too often traditional histories of the war have been written by non-specialists who rehash enduring myths and add little light to the debate. This is not the case with Lloyd's work. He has produced a traditional narrative history presented with all the benefits of modern scholarship. He does not dwell on the tired debate about whether the commanders of the First World War were callous butchers but makes clear that most of the generals on the Western Front were tough professionals grappling with a war of unprecedented scale where national survival was at stake. There were

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incompetents amongst them, but there were also intelligent and innovative leaders who did much to lead the Allies to victory. The pace of technological change is another theme of Lloyd's work. In 1914 the armies had often fought and manoeuvred in a manner that would have been recognisable to Napoleon, or at least Napoleon III. But by 1918 the Allies had developed a style of combined arms warfare that drew upon the available technologies of the age, deploying artillery, armour, aircraft, and platoons of infantry that remains a mainstay of warfare in the 21st century.

This is an impressive book. It covers a vast and complex period of history at brisk pace without becoming superficial. As a grand narrative it serves as an excellent single volume history of the Western Front and provides a useful corrective to some of the popular histories written by non-specialists during the centenary period. It is traditional in its approach but thoroughly modern in its scholarship.

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John Spencer, *Wilson's War: Sir Henry Wilson's Influence on British Military Policy in the Great War and its Aftermath*. Warwick: Helion, 2020. 215pp + 16 b/w photos + 1 b/w map. ISBN: 978-191286627 (hardback). Price £35.

The relationship between politicians and the military in Britain has invariably been fractious, never more so than during the First World War. One of the prominent players in the cast of 'brass hats and frockcoats' was Sir Henry Wilson. In this new book, John Spencer rebuilds Wilson's reputation by challenging the traditional view of this controversial character. The historiography of the war has previously tended to label him as a meddling, untrustworthy schemer. Someone prepared to criticise both his enemies and allies to benefit his own cause. Spencer has cast a different light on this senior soldier whose role in the war was undermined by Charles Callwell's publication in 1927 of Wilson's private diaries in unedited form. Critics seized upon these often-frustrated personal reflections as an opportunity to malign Wilson. He was accused of putting French interests before British and pursuing his own career at the expense of others. It has been an enduring characterisation. The central theme of this book is that, far from being a political intriguer and dissembler, Henry Wilson was a soldier diplomat who possessed strategic vision coupled with a keen sense of the importance of the alliance with France. He was a key influencer in fighting coalition warfare. Spencer argues that Wilson's collaborative acumen and his clear view of high