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Review of *Wilson's War: Sir Henry Wilson's Influence on British Military Policy in the Great War and its Aftermath* by John Spencer

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REVIEWS

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

level strategy played a crucial role in the formation of a unified system of command, a key component in the Allied victory of 1918.

This study traces Wilson's career from pre-war planning to the aftermath of the conflict. It expands upon the work of Keith Jeffrey in his biography entitled *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Spencer's important new research, based on his doctoral thesis, has a firm focus on Wilson's impact upon military strategy rather than his involvement in Irish politics or his undistinguished spell as a field commander. We are given further insight into this complex character whose impact upon Allied policy has previously been underestimated. Early on in the book, Spencer dismisses the charge that Wilson was an overtly political figure, by pointing out that prior to the war military networks held sway in the form of several different 'rings'. He makes the case that most senior officers were aligned with one or another and had a penchant for lobbying. Politicking within the military was commonplace. Unfortunately for Wilson, he was seen as a ringleader in the 1914 Curragh Incident, which set Prime Minister Asquith against him. Spencer explains that as a result he spent the early years of the war in a series of unrewarding roles. One of these was as GOC IV Corps. While he did not cover himself with glory as a field commander, this work goes some way to defend Wilson as a victim of circumstances during this episode. By the end of 1916 his spell in the field had come to a close leaving him disillusioned and resentful with little chance of promotion. Following a period as senior liaison to French headquarters he was appointed head of Eastern Command back in Britain. This could hardly be seen as a move up the ladder but it transpired to be a golden opportunity.

Spencer's investigation breaks fresh ground by explaining the pivotal part played by Wilson in the development of military policy. He sheds new light on Wilson's role in establishing the Supreme War Council (SWC) and as a consequence of this, his influence over grand strategy in 1917-18. The author delivers a compelling argument that Wilson saw the war more holistically than his counterparts. As early as 1915, he had been advocating a body similar to the SWC to oversee Allied decision-making. Crucially, Spencer outlines how Wilson's communication skills and his ability to explain his ideas succinctly to politicians played to his advantage. To back up these contentions, this account has a detailed analysis of the papers submitted to the War Cabinet by Sir Douglas Haig, Lord French, Sir William Robertson and Wilson in autumn 1917. This offers a fascinating insight into how British strategy was developed. Spencer highlights how Wilson came into his own after his paper led to him becoming favoured advisor to Lloyd George, Asquith's successor as Prime Minister. This was the catalyst that reset his career and led to his ascent to the top table. A vital element that Wilson brought to this forum was his strong relationships with the French military and political leaders, the senior partner in this coalition war. As Spencer points out, even after victory was achieved Wilson continued to mould post war policy about how Britain

REVIEWS

might win the peace. Described here as 'the war after the war', some of these proposals still have ramifications today.

This study reveals that Wilson was a far more nuanced character than previously believed and reveals his role as the prime mover behind the establishment of the SWC. Not only has Spencer gone some way to redeem Wilson's somewhat tarnished reputation, he has provided a masterly exposition of his influence over Allied military strategy in the final year of the war. The interaction between politicians and the military is seen at close quarters. This book is an indispensable guide for anyone with an interest in how war policy was formulated during the First World War.

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Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*. London: Hurst & Company, 2020. 392 pp. ISBN 978-1787382152 (hardback). Price £45.

By the end of 1919, over 1.4 million Indians had served in the war. Of this number, 563,369 were followers or non-combatants. The demand for their labour was constant. 'Coolies', supposedly unskilled menial labourers, filled these ranks and form the focus of Radhika Singha's richly detailed and compelling *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*. Indian followers served myriad essential roles including *kahars* (stretcher-bearers), *syces* (grooms and grasscutters), *mehtars* (latrine cleaners) and *drabis* (mule-drivers). The 'Coolie Corps' performed both portorage and construction work. In all, non-combatant labour formed a critical, though hitherto ignored, structure of the war.

In the past twenty years, historians have increasingly argued the ways in which the First World War must be understood as a global conflict. Whether this was through the experiences of the one million Indian sepoys who served in the conflict or a broader reframing of the war as a one among global empires, our understanding of the war has been reframed. Moreover, as Bruno Cabanes has argued, while the Armistice in Europe was agreed in November 1918, related regional conflicts continued beyond this date. Radhika Singha's work is a valuable contribution to this debate, addressing the global flows of labour in and beyond the European war. Singha shows how these frameworks, or regimes of labour, sustained the military infrastructure of the British Empire in India and, we can extrapolate, across and behind conflict lines.