

Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War, by Christopher Phillips (London: University of London Press, 2020; pp. xviii + 444. £50 and Open Access)

There is a well-known military adage, sometimes attributed to the Second World War US Army commander General Omar Bradley, that while 'amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics'. When it comes to the First World War, however, in contrast to the widespread fascination and, above all, controversy associated with tactics and operations, the subject of military logistics, supplies and transportation has not generated the same amount of detailed scholarly interest. Christopher Phillips's impressive debut, therefore, is an important, timely and very welcome addition to our knowledge and understanding of a neglected, though critical, aspect of Britain's war effort.

Based on Phillips's 2015 University of Leeds Ph.D. thesis, the book is one of the first titles in the Royal Historical Society's 'New Historical Perspectives' series, a print and Open Access publishing programme for early career researchers, published as an imprint of the Institute of Historical Research by the University of London Press. Unsurprisingly, it is an academically rigorous and weighty volume, comprising over 400 pages, and is replete with maps, tables and charts to assist the reader. Upon reading the title, one may be forgiven for thinking that what lies ahead is a rather dry, dull and difficult narrative. However, Phillips succeeds brilliantly in transforming his subject into an accessible, compelling and very informative read. Drawing upon an impressive array of new and under-used British archival and published primary sources, the analysis throughout is crisp, clear and engaging.

At its heart, the book examines how Britain's senior transport executives worked alongside and as part of the British Army and government during the First World War, lending their expertise in order to transform the nation's military supply and transportation arrangements both at home and abroad. Ensuring the steady flow of manpower and materials, Phillips argues, enabled the British Army to wage war 'on a hitherto unimaginable scale' (p. 371), and was paramount for the continued efficiency of British and Allied forces fighting on the Western Front, in Egypt, and Salonika. In so doing, the book complements the work of recent historians, including this reviewer, who have sought to understand how, and to what extent, the British Army harnessed the talents of its civilian soldiers between 1914 and 1918.

One of the principal contentions of the book is that, contrary to the view espoused in David Lloyd George's post-war memoirs and subsequently reinforced in both popular historiography and culture, the British Army was not an insular, hidebound and technophobic institution, unwilling to take advice from 'outsiders'. In fact, as Phillips skilfully demonstrates, senior British officers were already well acquainted with the managers of the country's most prominent transportation companies before the war, most noticeably via the establishment of the Railway Executive Committee (REC) in 1912, and the development of the 'with France' (WF) scheme, in which military, civilian and government officials worked out a plan that helped ensure the speedy and efficient mobilisation of British forces to the Continent in the summer of 1914. The army's exploitation of civilian knowledge and expertise continued throughout the war. In particular, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the infamous commander-in-chief on the Western Front from December 1915 onwards, 'championed' (p. 222) the role of civilian experts, most notably Sir Eric Geddes, whom Haig appointed director-general of transportation in late 1916, and who initiated the complete overhaul of the British logistical system in France and Belgium.

Geddes's reforms were indeed significant and far-reaching, as other historians such as Ian Malcolm Brown have already shown. But, as Phillips persuasively argues, they were far from unique in scale and scope. In fact, Geddes was part of a far more complex and multifaceted British military transportation and logistical system that not only included the input of other notable and hitherto unrecognised individuals such as Sir Sam Fay, Sir Francis Dent and Sir Guy Granet, but was shaped to a considerable extent by the ebb and flow of events on and off the battlefield, as well as the constraints imposed by fighting as part of a coalition. Thus, Phillips has written a book that will be of interest not only to British military historians of the First World War, but also to historians examining the nature of the relationship between the British state, its citizens and its armed forces during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It is difficult to pick holes in what is a compelling, detailed and well written piece of scholarship. However, if there is one aspect of the book that requires further exploration it would be how well the British Army's logistical achievements fared in comparison to those of its French and German counterparts. To be fair, Phillips does acknowledge this point in his conclusion. A more detailed assessment of the other belligerents' supply and transportation arrangements would offer conclusive proof as to whether or not the British Army's logistical system was more proficient and thus gave it a significant advantage. Nevertheless, this point should not detract too much from what is an otherwise detailed and thought-provoking study of an unfashionable, though hugely significant, aspect of British First World War military operations. As such, it deserves to be widely read.

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