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**Henry Wilson and the role of civil-military cooperation during the planning of
British mobilisation for war, 1910-1914**

In August 1910, Henry Wilson became head of the Directorate of Military Operations [DMO] at the War Office. This small and isolated directorate was responsible for planning the mobilisation scheme to be employed by the British Expeditionary Force [BEF] in the event of war, making Wilson the man most connected to the 'With France' plan that propelled the BEF onto what became the Western Front.² Over the previous six years, following the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* between France and Britain, successive Directors had developed mobilisation schemes within the narrow confines of the military; however the creation of such proposals could not remain a solely military concern if a practicable plan was to be produced. The evolution of modern, machine-intensive, industrial warfare brought with it the establishment of an army requiring quantities of men, munitions and equipment incomparable to previous British military experience, all of which required transportation across both land and sea. Although the term 'grand strategy' would not be coined until after the First World War, the work of the DMO in the period under review illustrates that the twin necessities of peacetime preparation for war and an increasing role for 'civilian' actors within the military machine were, but only in part, recognised and acted upon prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.³

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² Although 'W.F.' occasionally refers to the initials of Henry Wilson and Ferdinand Foch, principal architects of the scheme, the term originally stood for 'With France'. See London, The National Archives [TNA]: Public Record Office [PRO] WO 106/49A/1 Wilson-Foch scheme – Expeditionary Force to France, Address by Major-General Sir P.P. de B. Radcliffe, p. 3.

³ H. Strachan, 'Strategy and War', in *The Oxford Handbook of War*, ed. by J. Lindley-French & Y. Boyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 30-42 (p. 35); The contrast is provided by the experience of munitions supply, in which the War Office contracts pool remained small and exclusive prior to the war despite the existence of a 'shells

Using the extant records of the DMO, this article illustrates that the four years of Wilson's leadership of the directorate represent a period in which the British Army, consistent with the dominant military ideology of the time which stressed the importance of swift, decisive battle,⁴ took advantage of the technical expertise within British transport companies to ensure that the BEF could take to the field as quickly and efficiently as possible upon the outbreak of war in Europe. In contrast to the wider lack of preparation for war in Britain, leading to the 'nearly calamitous breakdown' in industrial mobilisation during the opening year of the war, the transport of the BEF to the seaports of Britain in the weeks following the outbreak of war was declared to be 'a model of railway organisation'.⁵ The success of these logistical preparations was due to the existence of a sophisticated civil-military network fostered by Wilson during his period in office, whilst their character – and by implication the BEF's immediate response to the outbreak of war – were governed by a combination of the complexities of mobilising an industrial armed force, and the strategic preferences of the Director himself.⁶

A committed Francophile with a lifelong affinity to France engendered by a succession of French governesses in his youth, Wilson entered the DMO following a four-year spell as the Commandant of the Staff College in Camberley.⁷ At the Staff College, Wilson had sought to establish a coherent system of higher education and training for the army, of vital importance for

scandal' during the Boer War. See C. Trebilcock, 'War and the failure of industrial mobilisation: 1899 and 1914', in *War and Economic Development. Essays in memory of David Joslin*, ed. by J.M. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp.139-64.

⁴ S. van Evera, 'The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War', *International Security*, 9, no.1 (1984), 58-107; B. Durieux, 'The History of Grand Strategy and the Conduct of Micro-Wars', in *The Oxford Handbook*, pp. 135-47 (pp. 143-4).

⁵ Trebilcock, 'War and the failure', p. 139; K. Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. A Political Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 102.

⁶ The 'W.F.' scheme was by no means universally accepted within the army during the pre-war period, however Wilson's position as Director of Military Operations afforded him the opportunity to establish primacy for his own scheme over those who introduced alternative options by ensuring the 'W.F.' scheme was comprehensively planned, whilst the alternatives were not. See W.J. Philpott, 'The Strategic Ideas of Sir John French', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 12, no.4 (1989), 458-78; H. Strachan, 'The British Army, its General Staff and the Continental Commitment 1904-1914', in *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation c. 1890-1939*, ed. by D. French and B. Holden Reid (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 75-94.

⁷ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, p. 4.

the development of professional skills among officers. His objective had been to create ‘a corps of officers imbued with uniform methods of work and a common approach to staff problems’. As Commandant, Wilson also took the opportunity to promote specific guiding principles to his students, challenging the ‘next generation’ of army officers to consider the policies he favoured to the detriment of alternatives. Foremost amongst the principles promoted by Wilson was the need for ‘readiness against Germany in alliance with France’.⁸

Wilson’s pro-French position was demonstrated in an exercise set for the senior students at the College in November 1908. The group assignment, entitled the ‘Belgian Scheme’, comprised ‘a study of operations involving the employment of the BEF on the continent of Europe’. The students were handed the scenario of deteriorating relations between France and Germany, leading to an invasion of France through the violation of Belgian neutrality.⁹ The students’ task was to produce a memorandum illustrating the views of the General Staff as to ‘the most effective means of employing the BEF’ in the event of such an occurrence.¹⁰ The specificity of the exercise was criticised in Parliament, leading to the 1909 edition of the assignment removing the reference to Belgian neutrality, but maintaining the basic premise of a projected Franco-German conflict.¹¹

Aside from inculcating his students with thoughts of a possible European war, Wilson also frequently visited the Franco-German-Belgian borderland, territory that would conceivably be

⁸ W. Philpott, ‘The General Staff and the Paradoxes of Continental War’, in *The British General Staff*, pp. 95-111 (p. 100); it is also important to note that Wilson was by no means alone in stressing the importance of fostering friendly relations with France in opposition to the German threat. A former head of the DMO, James Grierson, had reached the same conclusion as early as 1897. See A. Vagts, *The Military Attaché* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 152; Strachan, ‘British Army’, pp. 82-3.

⁹ Grierson had used the same scenario as the premise behind a war game played out in 1905, which concluded that a British mobilisation scheme focused upon Antwerp would ‘leave the German army in a favourable position for pursuing its movement westwards’. See TNA: PRO WO 33/364 Records of a Strategic War Game 1905, p. 156.

¹⁰ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, p. 73.

¹¹ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, pp. 72-3.

the theatre of operations for the BEF in the event of a conflict erupting.¹² In the summer of 1909 he travelled by train and bicycle from Mons into France, and along the French frontier to the Swiss border. The following summer he made a note of significant new German railway construction, out of all proportion to peace-time traffic, near the border with Luxembourg.¹³ As Stevenson has argued, through the building of ‘more lines, and by double- and quadruple-tracking existing ones’, the European powers attempted to use railways to ‘tilt the balance’ in their favour should war be declared.¹⁴ Therefore, the construction Wilson noted was a sure sign of ongoing German military preparations and an integral part of the preparatory phase for the initial ‘race to the offensive’ on Germany’s western frontier.¹⁵

By the time he arrived at the DMO therefore, Wilson was already highly familiar with the problems to be faced in the readying of the BEF for continental warfare. He also had a sound knowledge, based on German railway building, of where the conflict was likely to take place.¹⁶ The technical plans he inherited to transport the BEF to that location, however, were by no means complete:

When [Wilson] took over the appointment there were certain tentative schemes in the War Office pigeon holes, but these were entirely academic, not a single practical step had

¹² Major-General C.E. Callwell, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. His Life and Diaries*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1927), pp. 72-3.

¹³ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, pp. 74-5; for a description of the major railway construction projects undertaken by Germany prior to the First World War, see E.F. Carter, *Railways in Wartime* (London: Frederick Muller, 1964), pp. 77-8.

¹⁴ D. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 15; Christian Wolmar also notes that the strategic implications of the proposed Berlin-Baghdad railway added to Anglo-German animosities during this period. See C. Wolmar, *Engines of War. How Wars Were Won and Lost on the Railways* (London: Atlantic, 2010), pp. 127-9.

¹⁵ The impact of rapid mobilisation upon the ability of an army to take the offensive, deemed critical to the successful conclusion of military operations, was a constant theme in pre-war doctrine throughout Europe. See van Evera, ‘Cult of the Offensive’, pp. 58-63.

¹⁶ This information was also known by the French military authorities however, due to ‘disagreements among the generals, they only partially acted on it’. See Wolmar, *Engines of War*, p. 137.

been taken to give effect to them, no such thing as a railway timetable on our side of the Channel had been even attempted.¹⁷

Over the course of the next four years, Wilson would seek to rectify this situation and ensure that the BEF would be ready to take part in the Franco-German war he was convinced would soon occur.

Conceiving his primary duty upon entering the DMO to be ‘accelerating the mobilisation of the BEF’ to ensure its presence during the critical opening encounters of the war, Wilson immediately had an immense map of the Franco-German-Belgian borderland hung upon the wall of his office.¹⁸ The map was a graphic demonstration of Wilson’s commitment to the pursuit of a ‘with France’ strategy and it ‘delighted’ the French military attaché upon a visit to the directorate in November 1910.¹⁹ However, at the start of 1911, Wilson’s personal commitment to the French was not supported by a workable programme. A major obstacle was the level of secrecy attached to the mobilisation scheme and the problems this caused both within the army, in terms of interdepartmental cooperation, and in relation to obtaining the assistance of non-military specialists. For example, the Quartermaster General’s [QMG] department, responsible for the movement by rail of the BEF, had not made detailed arrangements for the transport of troops to the ports, whilst the government had forbidden all contact with the railway companies over whose lines the movements would by necessity have to take place.²⁰

Though understandable on grounds of diplomacy and national secrecy, the decision to detach the railway companies from the planning process severely restricted the amount of work the DMO could achieve in relation to the mobilisation scheme, explaining the condition of the plans

¹⁷ WO 106/49A/1 Address by Radcliffe, p. 1.

¹⁸ Callwell, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, vol. 1, p. 92.

¹⁹ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, p. 87.

²⁰ Callwell, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, vol. 1, pp. 91-2.

upon Wilson's appointment. However, during this period the senior executives of railway companies and the officer class of the army were major institutions in British society.²¹ Numerous politicians, including the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, and other prominent public figures (many with military backgrounds) acted as directors of the largest railway companies and mixed with senior military figures in social circles.²² Friendly relations were not uncommon between the two groups; however these social relationships were prevented from developing into a working partnership in the realm of mobilisation planning until 20 January 1911.²³ On this date Wilson successfully lobbied the Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane, to have this restrictive decree overturned.²⁴

Despite the critical importance of the efficient use of railways in swiftly mobilising the BEF in the event of war, the army did not possess officers with the technical expertise required to ensure that the railways would be operated in the most effective manner upon the outbreak of war.²⁵ This lack of specialist knowledge within the military led to a perception within the railway industry that the army underestimated the capacity of the railways to handle the exceptional

²¹ This point is borne out by the rising salaries of railway managers in the pre-war period and the increasing numbers being offered knighthoods, particularly from the late nineteenth century onwards. See T.R. Gourvish, 'A British Business Elite: The Chief Executive Managers of the Railway Industry, 1850-1922', *The Business History Review*, 47, no.3 (1973), 289-316 (pp. 308-9).

²² Grey served as a director on the North-Eastern Railway during his time out of government at the turn of the century. See E. Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916*, vol. 1 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), pp. 58-9; for a full list of North-Eastern directors between 1854 and 1914, illustrating the permeability of political, military and industrial elites during the pre-war period, see W.W. Tomlinson, *The North-Eastern Railway: Its Rise and Development* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: A. Reid, 1915), pp. 768-70.

²³ As an example of this Colonel Seely, upon his appointment as Secretary of State for War in succession to Haldane in 1912, received a number of letters of congratulation. Among the letters retained by Seely is one from William Paget of the London and South-Western Railway. See Oxford, Nuffield College Library [NCL]: Papers of John Edward Bernard Seely, Lord Mottistone. MSS Mottistone 2: Correspondence 1911-1914, 2/101-116 Letters of congratulation on being made Secretary of State for War, Paget to Seely, 13 June 1912.

²⁴ Jeffery, *Sir Henry Wilson*, pp. 91-2. It is important to note however that this did not mean that the 'W.F.' scheme became common knowledge within civil or military circles at this point. The majority of Parliament only became aware of the existence of the scheme when Grey addressed the Commons on 3 August 1914, whilst senior military figures such as Douglas Haig, who was to command the BEF's I Corps, had scant knowledge of the planning process prior to August 1914. See S.B. Fay, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 542; G.D. Sheffield, *The Chief. Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum, 2011), p. 68.

²⁵ The dangers of uncoordinated military command of the railways had been demonstrated during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, where disastrous French Army control of the rail network led to congestion, confusion and ultimately defeat. See A. Mitchell, *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry* (New York: Berghahn, 2000).

burden expected to be placed upon them at the outbreak of war.²⁶ Such fears were not alleviated by the production of reports by the Committee of Imperial Defence expressing doubts about the ‘ability of the railway companies to cope with the extra strain that would be thrown upon them in time of war’.²⁷ Such judgments were made in spite of the fact that the railway companies and the military enjoyed a close working relationship during peacetime, particularly in the arrangement of movements of large bodies of troops to the annual manoeuvres. Such exercises were often handled under ‘war conditions’, in which orders were not communicated until the last minute to simulate the stresses to be expected at the opening of an actual conflict.²⁸ Clearly, then, communication between the two groups was absolutely necessary in order for the railway companies to ensure that suitable trains (in terms of both quantity and equipment) could be made available to the army as soon as they were required.

With permission to conduct conversations with the railway companies secured, Wilson set about the task of producing timetables for the despatch of the BEF, and their required equipment, to the ports earmarked for the embarkation of the force. The preparation of timetables was handled through a system of consultation between either the QMG’s department or the individual home commands and a selected railway company, depending on the nature of the required movement.²⁹ The railway company would receive from the military authority a programme containing the details of each and every unit to be moved, such details including: what the unit would consist of in terms of men and equipment; from which station it would commence mobilisation; the day after general mobilisation on which the move was to begin; and the time at

²⁶ ‘Railways and Military Operations’, *Railway Gazette*, 7 August 1914, p. 174.

²⁷ NCL: MSS Mottistone 11: CID, 1909-1912, 11/1-13 Correspondence and documentation relating to the business of the sub-committee of the CID looking at the transportation and distribution of food and supplies, chaired by J.S., Sub-Committee to consider the desirability of an enquiry into the question of local transportation and distribution of food supplies in time of war, 28 February 1910, p. 3.

²⁸ As an example, the London and South-Western Railway was responsible for the movement of ‘26,000 officers and men, 8,000 horses, 70 guns, and 1,200 transport vehicles, necessitating the running of 137 special trains... in the manoeuvre area’ during the summer manoeuvres of 1910. See ‘Railways and Military Operations’, p. 174.

²⁹ TNA: PRO WO 106/50 Scheme for mobilisation on a war footing – progress of scheme for despatch of forces (WH/1), Enclosure 1A – Memorandum by Captain H.O. Mance, R.E. (Staff Captain, QMG 2) on the questions raised by the Executive Committee in their Memorandum of 10 December 1912, 1 January 1913.

which it should arrive at the destination port. The railway company was then to arrange all the technical aspects of the move: the provision of rolling stock; the times of passing stations and junctions en route; the working up of a complete timetable; and the necessary steps to ensure that the locomotives and crews required would be available and run to time whenever the need for them arose.³⁰ Wherever potential clashes arose, the matter would be referred to the DMO who would prioritise the more urgent move.

As Southampton, earmarked for the despatch of the main body of troops, was on the London and South-Western system, the London and South-Western Railway [LSWR] became intimately connected with the development of the 'W.F.' scheme.³¹ Throughout the development of the schedule the LSWR acted as a 'secretary railway', the designated point of contact for all correspondence in reference to the scheme for both the War Office and the other railway companies involved.³² The projected time of arrival for each train at Southampton was delivered to a specialist staff working exclusively on the mobilisation timetable at the LSWR, and from this arrival time the route for each individual train could be planned back to the point at which it would be required to enter the London and South-Western system. The companies over whose lines the train would pass immediately before it entered the London and South-Western network would then be notified of the time they were expected to hand the train over. From this information that company could then trace the journey further back, either to the station of departure or to the next 'handover' station on the route.³³

³⁰ E.A. Pratt, *British Railways and the Great War; Organisation, Efforts, Difficulties and Achievements*, vol. 1 (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1921), pp. 27-8.

³¹ Southampton had fulfilled the same role in 1899 at the outbreak of the Boer War, and had a history of military service throughout the era of the British Empire. See I. Beckett, 'Going to War. Southampton and Military Embarkation', in *Southampton: Gateway to the British Empire*, ed. by M. Taylor (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 133-46; TNA: PRO WO 106/49A/2 Outline of scheme and details relating to Staff arrangements (with notes April 1937), iv. Home Railway movements.

³² WO 106/49A/1 Address by Radcliffe, p. 7.

³³ Pratt, *British Railways*, vol. 1, pp. 112-4.

Once the journey had been traced back to the station of departure, the time of entrainment was entered onto the individual unit's mobilisation scheme.³⁴ However, as the war establishments of certain units were amended each year by the Army Council, the timetables demanded constant revision to take into account the necessary changes and the possibility of specific railway equipment being required. Such changes could also raise the prospect of units being sent to different ports of embarkation, or adjustments made to the priority of their departure. Given the complexities involved, making these revisions was a time-consuming process, both for the DMO and for the larger railway companies.³⁵ Wilson for example would note in December 1913 that, despite those involved in the process having nearly two years experience by this point, when working in conjunction with the QMG and Admiralty upon amendments handed down from the Army Council, it took four months for the DMO to effect changes to the timetable.³⁶

The period that followed the Wilson-Haldane conversation was not simply characterised by hard work at the DMO and among the railway companies. The period was one of inter-departmental cooperation between those government departments which existed 'solely for the purpose of war' such as the Admiralty and the War Office, and those whose primary responsibility lay in the administration of peacetime Britain.³⁷ This cooperation was exemplified in the creation of the 'War Book', a series of instructions to be followed by appropriate government departments and industrial concerns upon the declaration of a precautionary period and consequent announcement of an order to mobilise. First published in 1912, and amended following further discussions in both 1913 and 1914, the book acted as a step-by-step guide for officials in areas as wide-ranging as the provision of policemen for the protection of vital railway junctions to the

³⁴ WO 106/49A/1 Address by Radcliffe, p. 7.

³⁵ The largest railway company in Britain prior to the war, the London and North-Western Railway, received such drastic alterations to their share of the transportation task during the winter of 1912-13 that the company created a special department dedicated purely to the amendment of the scheme to ensure its readiness. See E.A. Pratt, *War Record of the London and North-Western Railway* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1922), pp. 6-7; Pratt, *British Railways*, vol. 1, p. 29 details the strain of the work on railway employees.

³⁶ WO 106/49A/2 Revision of programme: remarks of various directorates, 4 December 1913.

³⁷ TNA: PRO CAB 15/2 Minutes, Papers and War Books, Note by the Secretary, 4 November 1910.

despatch of mobilisation telegrams to soldiers. From the 1913 edition onwards, the 'War Book' was arranged in chapters by department, so that each group could obtain the instructions relevant to their department without having to concern themselves with orders only applicable to other sections.

The Foreign Office, responsible for giving notice of the possibility of war to the other departments involved, appeared first in the book. Next were the War Office and Admiralty, whose chief concerns were the security of the nation and the mobilisation of the army and navy, followed by the Colonial and Indian Offices, in charge of Britain's overseas territories. The Privy Council and Treasury, responsible for issuing the proclamation of war and the authorisation of war measures, followed, along with the Home Office and Local Government Board who were to oversee internal order and the relief of distress. The final chapters of the book dealt with the Board of Trade, through whom the railway companies received their instructions, the Customs and Excise Board with their duties in relation to supply and blockade, and the Post Office, responsible for the gargantuan task of delivering the mobilisation telegrams and disseminating official information.³⁸ By crystallising the commands in print, the 'War Book' ensured that the response of the government and the required British industries – regardless of the turnover in personnel between the creation and implementation of the orders contained within – would be coherent and organised. Employees at the Board of Trade or the general managers of railway companies, people whose daily focus was primarily upon their peacetime occupations rather than war preparation, could simply consult the book in order to establish 'best practice' upon receiving the signal to mobilise.³⁹

³⁸ S. Sokolov Grant, 'The Origins of the War Book', *Royal United Services Institution [RUSI] Journal*, 117:667 (1972), 65-9, (p. 66).

³⁹ Copies of all three 'War Books' are available. See TNA: PRO CAB 15/3-5 War Book: Summary of action taken by Departments, 27 February 1912-30 June 1914.

Concurrent with production of the 'War Book', action continued to take place on the task of transporting the BEF across the sea. On the British side of the Channel, the owners of the port of Southampton, the LSWR, undertook significant railway construction to bring the total length of track within the docks up to thirty-seven miles.⁴⁰ Bespoke diagram boards charting the special facilities required by individual units were also set up to allow the port authorities to keep track of the complex demands of the military.⁴¹ Elsewhere, Newhaven in Sussex, the closest Channel port to London, had been chosen as the primary embarkation point for the myriad supplies required by the BEF, whilst Avonmouth, Liverpool, Belfast, Queenstown, Cork and Glasgow were also assigned roles in the mobilisation process.⁴²

On the French side, upon the invitation of Colonel Seely four shipping experts investigated the problems to be tackled in the landing of the BEF upon the European mainland.⁴³ Sir Thomas Royden and Sir Lionel Fletcher took up the challenge and, together with officers from both the naval and military staffs of Britain and France, made a thorough reconnaissance of the Channel ports to be used by the BEF. The shipping of the BEF was a highly technical operation, requiring detailed examination of such questions as berthing facilities, tidal limitations, the number and power of the cranes available and the existence of suitable storage facilities.⁴⁴ The recommendations of the Royden-Fletcher report, handed over to the Admiralty in February 1913, were adopted as the basis of the scheme for disembarkation in France.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ The LSWR had taken over the port, including the Southampton Dock Company, in 1892; Pratt, *British Railways*, vol. 2, pp. 1008-9.

⁴¹ Beckett, 'Going to War', p. 142.

⁴² *The Modern History and Future Prospects of Newhaven Harbour, Sussex* (London: Newhaven Harbour Company, 1884); Brigadier-General Sir J.E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War based on Official Documents. Military Operations. France and Belgium, 1914*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 30-1.

⁴³ The four were Sir Thomas Royden (Cunard Company), Sir Lionel Fletcher (White Star), Sir Richard Holt (Blue Funnel) and Sir Owen Philipps (Royal Mail). Royden and Fletcher, 'in order to fully discharge [the task]... gave up all their private work for many months'. See F.E.S. Birkenhead, *Contemporary Personalities* (London: Cassell, 1924), pp. 291-2.

⁴⁴ The extent to which prominent figures such as Royden, Fletcher and the general managers of railway companies were coerced by the government into assisting the military in such investigations, or whether such time-consuming tasks were undertaken with great patriotic enthusiasm, is currently unclear and would benefit from further study.

⁴⁵ WO 106/49A/1 Address by Radcliffe, p. 4.

The Royden-Fletcher report highlighted that the crane facilities at each of the ports earmarked to receive the BEF: Havre, Rouen and Boulogne, were inadequate for the task of handling the supplies projected to accompany the force. In order to prevent backlogs occurring therefore, it was decided that mechanical transport should be divided and sent to all three ports rather than being concentrated upon one facility.⁴⁶ Such recommendations inevitably led to further amendments to the mobilisation timetables in Britain.⁴⁷ In light of the vast quantities of data being received, processed and acted upon by the DMO in conjunction with the scheme, regular service updates were demanded by Wilson to verify that the most current information was being acted upon, and that existing deficiencies in the scheme were in the process of being rectified.⁴⁸

These 'board meetings' also offered Wilson's subordinates the opportunity to report on the progress of particular tasks to the Director, for instance on the procurement of lorries to be used by the BEF.⁴⁹ The majority of the vehicles required were to be sourced from civilian firms upon mobilisation. Of these, the bulk were to be purchased through a provisional subsidy scheme between the army and the vehicle owner, the rest by impressments upon mobilisation. A census was carried out over the course of 1912 in order to identify suitable vehicles.⁵⁰ By September 1913 the DMO was able to confirm that over 600 of the 1000 vehicles required to complete the war establishment of the BEF had been provisionally registered, whilst the QMG's department were busy overseeing the enlistment of 3,000 men to drive and maintain the vehicles.⁵¹ The number of petrol lorries to be obtained by the Army Service Corps had been reduced to 383 and arrangements for the impressments of the necessary vehicles upon mobilisation had been made,

⁴⁶ WO 106/49A/2 Outline of scheme, i. Factors affecting plan of movement and Staff work.

⁴⁷ WO 106/49A/2. A hand-written note on the file states that the timetables for 1913 had been amended in light of the recommendations of the Royden-Fletcher report.

⁴⁸ WO 106/50 A list of some outstanding questions to be settled, 29 October 1911.

⁴⁹ See for example WO 106/50 A list, Harper to Wilson, 17 April 1912; Harper to Wilson, 1 April 1913.

⁵⁰ A similar census took place to identify the 36,000 horses required to bring the BEF up from its peacetime establishment of 19,000 to its war establishment of 55,000 horses. See Brigadier-General T.R.F. Bate, 'Horse Mobilisation', *RUSI. Journal*, 67:465 (1922), 16-25, (p. 19); Lieutenant-Colonel G.F. MacMunn, 'The Horse Mobilisation of the Forces', *Army Review*, 5:2 (1913); reprinted pamphlet version in TNA: PRO WO 138/52 War Office: Personal Files, General Sir John Cowans.

⁵¹ WO 106/49A/2 Outline of scheme, ix. Mechanical Transport.

the lorries in question having been earmarked for military use. In all, procedures for the provision of mechanical transport were observed, a year before hostilities commenced, to have 'reached a point where it may be considered there is no room for anxiety as to provision'.⁵²

Through careful liaison with suitably qualified civilian experts and the cooperation of British industry, wedded to Wilson's determination to complete the project and be able to render assistance to the French, details for both the movement of, and logistical support for, the BEF were settled by August 1914. A complete set of timetables had been printed and issued to the relevant units detailing their peace station, place of mobilisation and the location of their mobilisation equipment, alongside a series of tables distributed to each of the commands indicating the date after general mobilisation on which every unit had to be ready to move.⁵³ As Wilson deemed the swift arrival of the BEF to be critical to the success of Anglo-French operations, each unit was instructed that mobilisation would take place at the designated time, regardless of whether the unit had completed their preparations or not.⁵⁴

Although Britain's commitment to the war would be governed by Cabinet decision rather than by the existence of inflexible timetables, the swift arrival of that commitment was dependent upon the efficient implementation of the railway moves worked out over the preceding three years.⁵⁵ Each unit or part thereof was allocated to a train, whose projected time of arrival was recorded alongside their departure time from the mobilisation camp. At the embarkation ports,

⁵² WO 106/50 Mobilisation Requirement – Conference of Military Members held on 10 April 1913 in CIGS' room, p. 5.

⁵³ TNA: PRO WO 106/49A/8 Expeditionary Force Tables and details of the War Establishments of Units, January 1914; Mobilisation dates by Commands, April 1914.

⁵⁴ 'We must mobilise on the same day as France and Germany... We must have every detail of mobilisation, concentration and transport worked out to the last degree'. TNA: PRO WO 106/47 Conditions of a War between France and Germany (E2/25), 12 August 1911.

⁵⁵ This contention supplements A.J.P. Taylor's famous, but misguided, view of the opening phase of the war. See A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Time-table: How the First World War Began* (London: Macdonald, 1969). Philpott, 'General Staff,' pp. 99-100 emphasises the argument made in the current article; The complete set of timetables is available at TNA: PRO WO 106/49B/3 Wilson-Foch scheme – Expeditionary Force to France, Railway Timetables, Expeditionary Force Time Tables, 1914.

troops or supplies were allocated to a cross-Channel transport and the serial number of the ship telegraphed to the destination port. This was to ensure that the authorities in France were aware of the contents of each arriving ship and could direct it to the most suitable berth for disembarkation.⁵⁶ Finally, following an enforced rest period at the French ports, the units would be arranged into trainloads on the French pattern and transported to the concentration zone.⁵⁷ The final step of this itinerary was overseen by the French military transport authorities centred at French *Grand Quartier Général* who had accepted responsibility for the ‘construction, repair, maintenance, traffic management and protection’ of the BEF’s logistics network for the duration of the conflict.⁵⁸

For all Wilson’s statements emphasising the importance of the BEF mobilising in line with the French, Britain would not enter the war, and therefore authorise a general mobilisation, until the expiration of the ultimatum to Germany on the night of 4 August.⁵⁹ This was almost three days later than the French. The delay caused Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, to declare the ‘W.F.’ scheme null and void, suggesting instead that the force should be shipped to Antwerp.⁶⁰ Aside from the implications of such a move to Dutch neutrality, the transportation of the BEF to Antwerp had already been discounted as unfeasible on strategic grounds by Grierson’s war game in 1905. As a result of the war game, Belgian reticence to encourage a close relationship with the British military, and Wilson’s obfuscation in the face of alternatives to the ‘W.F.’ scheme, the port of Antwerp had not been thoroughly reconnoitred to assess its suitability

⁵⁶ WO 106/49B/3 Serial Railway Tables Southampton, 1914.

⁵⁷ Differences between French military railway policy and the British method meant that the administrative echelons were required to allot units to trains by different methods on either side of the Channel to ensure the most efficient use of the available rolling stock. See WO 106/49A/2 i. Factors affecting plan; TNA: PRO WO 106/49B/7 Wilson-Foch scheme – Expeditionary Force to France, Disembarkation Tables, 1914.

⁵⁸ Colonel A.M. Henniker, *History of the Great War. Transportation on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (London: His/Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1937), p. 13. This agreement did not stand up to the test of war, Britain taking an increasing share of the responsibility for logistics on the Western Front as the conflict developed. See I.M. Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front, 1914-1919* (London: Praeger, 1998).

⁵⁹ For example: ‘it is essential that the Secretary of State [for War] should be fully aware of the difference it will make to the course of the campaign whether we mobilise early or late. It is scarcely too much to say that the difference may be that of victory or defeat’. See WO 106/47 Conditions of a War, 12 August 1911.

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO CAB 22/1 War Council Minutes of Meetings, Secretary’s Notes of a War Council Held at 10, Downing Street, 5 August 1914, pp. 1-2.

as a landing zone for British troops, nor had the requisite railway timetables from the port to the area of concentration been developed and distributed among the units.⁶¹

The scale of the work undertaken by the DMO over the previous four years had demonstrated that ship and rail movements utilising foreign facilities ‘simply could not be improvised at the last moment’.⁶² For the senior commander of the BEF to suggest such a policy at this stage was largely reflective of French’s long-held concerns over the autonomy of his command on French soil, but augured ill for his appreciation of the importance of logistics during the coming conflict.⁶³ Any further discussion of Antwerp as a possible destination was terminated via an explanation of the impracticality of amending the mobilisation scheme in such a drastic fashion at such a late stage by Sir Charles Douglas, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Haig’s proposal, for the BEF to remain at home for ‘two or three months, during which the immense resources of the Empire’ could be developed, was similarly discounted. The nature of the understanding between the British and French governments, symbolised by the exchange of letters in 1912, and the lack of resources in Britain for a long war, a result of military spending restrictions imposed by a Liberal government committed to social reform, meant that however small the force relative to the vast armies of France and Germany, British support was expected on the other side of the Channel immediately.⁶⁴

With the alternatives dismissed, the only remaining practicable mobilisation scheme was Wilson’s. It boasted the benefits of thorough logistical preparation, interdepartmental

⁶¹ Strachan, ‘British Army’, p. 93; Philpott, ‘Strategic Ideas’, p. 469; Philpott, ‘General Staff’, pp. 107-8.

⁶² S.R. Williamson, Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy. Britain and France Prepare for War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 317.

⁶³ Philpott, ‘Strategic Ideas’, pp. 465-7. The assumption that French would command the BEF had been in existence for many years prior to the outbreak of the war. See I.F.W. Beckett, ‘“Selection by Disparagement”: Lord Esher, the General Staff and the Politics of Command, 1904-1914’, in *The British General Staff*, 41-56 (p. 55).

⁶⁴ The significance of the Grey-Cambon exchange of letters in 1912 is summarised in Fay, *Origins*, vol. 1, pp. 320-3; The military budget was fundamental in restricting both the size of and the amount of equipment available to the BEF prior to the war. See E.M. Spiers, *Haldane: An Army Reformer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980), p. 81.

cooperation, the input of technically qualified industrial experts and, crucially, it could be brought into action almost immediately. The following day Lord Kitchener, freshly installed as Secretary of State for War, decided that four divisions of the six provided for in the mobilisation scheme could be immediately transported to France.⁶⁵ On 8 August, owing to the interruption to arrangements brought about by what Wilson referred to as the ‘dithering’ of the government over the previous week, the railway programme commenced. 350 trains, comprising an average of thirty vehicles each, were made up ready for despatch to Southampton.⁶⁶ The schedule demanded that the LSWR put those 350 trains into the port within sixty hours. The level of contingency built into the timetables led to ‘by far the greater proportion’ of trains arriving at the ports between twenty and thirty minutes early, with just one train arriving late, and by only five minutes. The sixty hour target was achieved in just forty-five. Practically every day for the first three weeks of the war, the railways handled between seventy and ninety trains per day, arriving into the port at intervals of just under one quarter of an hour.⁶⁷

Britain’s status as one of the world’s foremost industrial powers, possessing an abundance of specialists in myriad fields of business and commerce alongside a dense logistics network, ensured that Britain’s mobilisation strategy was guided by professional advice and that the advanced transportation links throughout the country were employed to the highest standards of efficiency. The BEF in 1914 may have attempted a military manoeuvre more complex than anything previously attempted by a British force but, unlike the German Army’s ‘Schlieffen Plan’, it did not attempt anything that was logistically ‘a gamble’.⁶⁸ The industrial scale of modern warfare ensured that the effective contribution of a British force required detailed planning and

⁶⁵ CAB 22/1 Secretary’s Notes of a War Council Held at 10, Downing Street, 6 August 1914, p. 1.

⁶⁶ N. d’Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy. Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 112.

⁶⁷ ‘Railway Administration in War’, *Railway Gazette*, 20 November 1914, pp. 529-30; Beckett, ‘Going to War’, p. 143; ‘Mobilisation and Movement of Troops’, in *Records of Railway Interests in the War* (London: The Railway News, 1915), 18.

⁶⁸ ‘Schlieffen does not appear to have devoted much attention to logistics when he evolved his great Plan’. See M. van Creveld, *Supplying War. Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 138.

thorough organisation, aspects which demanded a significant investment of both time and resources. In mobilisation at least, unlike in the supply of manpower or munitions, this occurred; the thorough work of the DMO and the employees of numerous railway companies – artfully applied by Henry Wilson towards the strategy he himself favoured – ensured that the BEF took its place on the French left prior to the colossal engagement at Mons that would signify the commencement of Britain’s contribution to the fighting on the Western Front.

As a French artillery officer noted in 1913, the intervention of the BEF in a European war was a military act too serious to be left to the ‘eleventh hour’.⁶⁹ Unlike Germany and France however, instinctively wedded to the rigid ‘Schlieffen Plan’ and ‘Plan XVII’ schemes respectively, Britain was not committed to an autonomous ‘war by timetable’ in the opening days of the conflict.⁷⁰ British strategy in the first week of August was, in fact, guided more by political considerations of domestic and foreign policy than by inflexible mobilisation schedules. The decision to go to war, and the time to act upon that decision, were reached by governmental judgment rather than by the demands of railway schedules.⁷¹

The work of the DMO, although concealed from both Parliament and much of the army throughout the pre-war period, did not occur within a vacuum. The evolution of the ‘With France’ scheme, from the appointment of Henry Wilson as Director onwards, was influenced by the input and knowledge of prominent civilian business leaders and by the strategy favoured by Wilson himself. It was the technical expertise of a highly-skilled industrial society, guided by a ‘forceful advocate of the continental commitment’, which ensured that the BEF was transported across land and sea in time – and position – to make a telling contribution to the initial battles of

⁶⁹ Capitaine d’Artillerie A. de Tarlé, ‘The British Army and a Continental War’, *RUSI. Journal*, 57:421 (1913), 384-401, (p. 400).

⁷⁰ For recent analyses of the German and French mobilisation strategies, see A. Mombauer, ‘German War Plans’, and R.A. Doughty, ‘France’, in *War Planning 1914*, ed. by R.F. Hamilton & H.H. Herwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 48-79; 143-74 respectively.

⁷¹ K. Neilson, ‘Great Britain’, in *War Planning*, pp. 175-97, (p. 193).

the First World War.⁷² As such, it was an illustration of what could be achieved in an industrial conflict given sound, logistically feasible, foundations, and represents Britain's first step towards the civil-military partnership that would characterise the 'total war' to come.

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⁷² Strachan, 'British Army', p. 77; Pratt, *British Railways*, vol. 1, p. 115.

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