



Turning Point 1917: The British Empire at War ed. Douglas E. Delaney and Nikolas Gardner.

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Turning Point 1917 gathers essays first delivered at a “mini-workshop” at the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) in November 2014. Its editors, historians Douglas Delaney and Nikolas Gardner (both RMC), have dedicated the book to a colleague and fellow contributor, Keith Neilson, who sadly passed away before it was published. The volume comprises an introduction and conclusion and nine essays on a range of topics relating to “the British imperial war effort during the most pivotal and dynamic twelve months of the Great War” (dust-jacket blurb), especially during 1917. The chapters, well written by experts in their fields, are of a high standard and accompanied by useful black-and-white maps and illustrations. The editors assert that “no previous study has attempted a multidimensional and multinational examination of the imperial war effort during a single year” (10). Nor, unfortunately, does their anthology, whose essays, they admit,

do not amount to a comprehensive account of the imperial war effort in 1917.... But they do demonstrate how particular campaigns, strategies, command arrangements, home fronts, and political developments fit into the imperial war effort or were affected by it. All indicate that 1917 was a year of change, but one in which a specific turning point is difficult to distinguish.... Rather 1917 saw a series of turning points—events, trends, and developments that strengthened the position of the British Empire relative to its enemies and laid the groundwork for victory. (9)

Several key elements of the imperial story in 1917 are entirely or almost entirely missing: for example, the establishment and operation of the Imperial War Cabinet, the Montagu Declaration promising greater home rule for India, and the Balfour Declaration, which offered a Jewish homeland in Palestine, presumably under British tutelage.

The introduction sketches events of 1917, concentrating on the experience of Britain and the White Dominions, before outlining the following chapter contents. In chapter 1, William Philpott (King’s College London) summarizes the events of 1917 from a British perspective, but says nothing new about the Empire in particular, except that “at the first Imperial War Conference, it became clear that the price for greater dominion effort during the war would be more dominion autonomy after it” (23).

In chapter 2, Keith Neilson (RMC) analyzes the British naval blockade against Germany, stressing that the US entry into the war (Apr. 1917) made it easier to manage, from both operational and political perspectives. Again, there is little here specifically on the British Empire.

Chapter 3, by Chris Madsen (RMC) and Michael Moir (York Univ.), examine in detail the dramatic wartime expansion of Canadian shipbuilding and the hopes this raised for creating an industry that would compete with British shipyards after the war. But Britain ordered only eighty-nine ships from Canada, hardly a significant number, given that 640 British merchant ships had been sunk by enemy action even before the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare in early 1917. Supply shortages, labor problems, harsh climate, and the proximity of American yards made Canada an uncompetitive ship producer both during and after the war.

In chapter 4, Ian Beckett (Univ. of Kent) skillfully shows how the determination of Australia and Canada to keep their military forces on the Western Front outside the British command structure complicated the planning and conduct of military operations in 1917. In reprising the history of the Australasian and Canadian expeditionary forces, Beckett highlights the irony that, although the forces of the Empire were cooperating on an unprecedented scale, interservice distrust and domestic political concerns—caused by high casualty rates—spawned a growing sense of nationhood and independence in the dominions rather than closer imperial integration.

Jeffrey Grey (late of the Australian Defence Force Academy) devotes chapter 5 to an investigation of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in 1917. He assesses the conquest of Palestine in the context of Britain's wider strategic concerns, concluding that similarities between the Western Front and Middle Eastern campaigns in terms of force structure, training, and emergent combined arms operations were closer than generally realized. But, though the capture of Jerusalem (Dec. 1917) was undoubtedly a notable event, it was not a military turning point in the war. By contrast, Grey does not discuss the Balfour Declaration (Nov. 1917), which in fact marked a momentous political turning point in the Middle East. Nor does he say much about the 800,000 Indian troops who made up a majority of the Empire's forces in Palestine and Iraq.

Chapter 6, by John Crawford (New Zealand Defence Force) concentrates on the growing resistance in New Zealand to Britain's continued demands for more reinforcements. Ultimately, over 90,000 (of a prewar population of 1.1 million) New Zealanders loyally served abroad during the war; almost 60,000 were killed or wounded. Those sacrifices and the introduction of conscription in 1916 made New Zealanders feel they were doing more than their fair share to bear the costs of the war, particularly as compared to Australia and Canada. So great was the pressure they applied that, by autumn 1917, the War Office in London finally lowered its requests for extra men.

Chapter 7, by Tim Stapleton (Univ. of Calgary) turns to the role Black Africans played in the efforts to clear their continent of German forces. Initially, the colonial governments were not eager to see native Africans take arms in a "white man's war." But the duration and high casualty rates (mostly due to disease) of the campaign in East Africa necessitated recruiting tens of thousands of Africans, despite the threat they might pose to colonial and racist policies after the war. Stapleton also notes the far larger contribution made by African bearers and laborers: 10 percent of the over one million who served did not survive the war—a death rate approaching that of troops on the Western Front. Although the war in Africa has recently been perceptively studied by Hew Strachan and other historians, Stapleton has made a fine, concise contribution to that understudied corner of Great War historiography.

In chapter 8, Serge Durlinger (Univ. of Ottawa) discusses the rioting and insurrectionary atmosphere that pervaded Montreal in summer 1917: the government's plans to introduce conscription (in response to pressure from London) "unleashed a political and cultural crisis in Canada, mainly, though not exclusively, pitting English-speaking Canadians against French speakers and opening up a Pandora's box of emotive ethno-linguistic disharmony that threatened to unravel the Confederation itself" (160). French Canadians had never identified with the imperial war effort in the way that New Zealanders or Anglophone Canadians did. By far the keenest of Canadian wartime volunteers were British immigrants. One wonders if the same was true of New Zealand volunteers. Though Crawford observes that recruitment of Maoris was not a great success, he does not explore whether that reflected a link between ethnicity and (un)willingness to volunteer. Such quibbles aside, I find chapters 6 and 8 to be the most interesting in the book. Both fill gaps in the existing literature and open new perspectives on wartime stresses endured by the Empire's constituent parts.

Finally, in chapter 9, Mark Connelly (Univ. of Kent) investigates the British media's attempts to rally flagging domestic support for the war after the bloody stalemate of the Somme and the harsh winter of 1916–17. He looks at the British government's efforts to influence the depiction of the war in the press. He shows how, in 1917, John Buchan's National War Aims Committee used rallies, meetings, and films to boost public morale. These were, however, outdone by the more professional approach of the newspaper tycoon Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), who, first for the Canadian forces and then for the War Office, cleverly capitalized on modern techniques of photo placement and realistic imagery to strengthen public support for the fighting men.

Turning Point 1917 is, then, something of a mixed bag. The chapters do not always focus on 1917 or persuasively identify "turning points" when they do. Moreover, the word "Empire" seems to mean here almost exclusively the white or predominantly white Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Thus, India, far the largest imperial supplier of troops, is barely touched on. Inconsistent and inadequate coverage of key subjects is another shortcoming. There are excellent discussions of recruitment and conscription in Canada and New Zealand, but not in Australia or, for that matter, the United Kingdom. The campaign in Palestine is covered, but not the one in Mesopotamia.

What, then, is the book's target audience? Undergraduates or general readers will do better to read one of the many excellent textbooks or general histories on the war. Specialists will learn little from either the "broad brush" or narrowly focused chapters, although those on Canada's conscription crisis, New Zealand recruitment, and the British media offer valuable and original perspectives. Overall then, the volume's learned contributors only partially make good on their publisher's claim that it "examine[s] the British imperial war effort during the most pivotal and dynamic twelve months of the Great War" (jacket blurb).