

*The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945.* By

DOUGLAS E. DELANEY (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; pp. 355. £85.00).

This original, interesting study is imperial and international history as it is military history. It proves, charts, and assesses the British-led fifty-year imperial ambition to combine British, Dominion – Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and South African – and Indian armies to fight as one. (India as a non-‘white’ colony with its British-officered army had less military autonomy.) The Boer War fiasco (1899-1902) when British-imperial troops struggled against exiguous enemy forces prompted the project. The literature currently sees the British Empire through the lens of trans-national imperial political networks, or it charts military evolution on a case-by-case national basis. Douglas Delaney connects these spheres with his history of imperial military networks. The linking of the British and imperial armies shows how disparate armies achieved ‘commonality’ through shared doctrine, principles, weapons provision, staff work, and staff colleges. Decision-makers designed this through shared professional military education (PME) at a difficult moment when the Dominions were pushing for more political autonomy and contra minority opposition from French Canadians, Boer-Afrikaans, and Irish labour in Australia.

The post-Boer War Elgin commission set out to transform the ‘aggregate’ (p. 5) of units without inter-operability that had fought the Boers. The Boer War made visible the malaise of British forces and (p. 27) ‘laid bare the costs of Britain’s policy of *splendid isolation*.’ Empire planners could do nothing until (p. 18) ‘the brain was put right.’ Staff officers would be the nervous system to empower a new

homogenous imperial army. But none of the Dominions wanted to relinquish complete control of their armies, while local interests resisted imperial defence projects of any type. Thus, War Secretary Lord Haldane adroitly abandoned imperial commitment to a continental war; instead, he secured acquiescence to forge armies along British lines. If there were a European war, the Dominions would be ready to take part; the organising of these armies made common political purpose more likely. Haldane knew that (p. 37) 'consensus was crucial' and he started with an imperial general staff in 1907.

Missions abounded as London sent out (p. 45) 'apostles for the army' to bring the 'new gospel of *Field Service Regulations* to the military forces of the empire.' It started with regular officers. These soldiers were to convince Dominion and Indian officers to (p. 47) 'to think alike on all matters of principle,' thereby ensuring that the 'territorial armies and militias of the empire would be compatible and ready for expansion in time of war.' The *Field Service Regulations* embodied necessary doctrinal knowledge and (p. 54) created a 'common approach to military problems.' Staff colleges at Camberley (UK) and Quetta (India) spread the word, as did sub-staff college training institutions and new Dominion staff colleges. The first Dominion officer (a Canadian) entered Camberley in 1903; an Australian followed in 1906, a New Zealander in 1907, and a South African in 1909; the first Australian Quetta candidate came in 1910. The Larkhill Royal Artillery School and the Hythe School of Musketry similarly trained imperial soldiers. Standardisation extended to officer cadet colleges, too, as at the Dominions' oldest one at Canada's Royal Military College. The British Empire in just twelve years had its new army and with war in 1914 (p. 94), for the 'cost of a hundred or so highly

skilled officers on loan to the dominions (which the dominions paid for), the promulgation of common procedures and doctrine, periodic reviews of dominion military establishments by inspectors-general, a handful of dominion vacancies at the staff colleges and army schools (which the dominions also paid for), plus a robust exchange of officers with the Indian Army, the War Office got colonial armies that were compatible with the regular army and capable of expansion in time of war.'

The colonial contribution of fighting divisions across numerous war zones during the First World War is well known but with this force multiplier came the complication of unit command. This is a useful tension in Delaney's book. British commanders tried to use imperial forces as they saw fit, while local imperial commanders and their political masters asserted their authority. This was a workable if fractious relationship but by the Second World War Britain felt its rough edges, as when Canberra pulled out (most of) its troops from North Africa to defend Australia. Participation in war gave the Dominions confidence and pools of capable staff-college trained officers; they started to fill and direct their own staff colleges. Meanwhile, Indian nationalists after 1918 worked on the Indianization of the officer corps, a move Britain resisted as it meant loss of control and Indian officers directing British soldiers. All but New Zealand had balked during the 1922 Chanak crisis.

The interwar years were ones of overstretch and retrenchment. PME sustained interoperability, while staff training (p. 184) 'continued to be a critical underpinning of the ability to act jointly.' The Visiting Forces Bill of 1933 codified ideas of 'serving together' and 'combination' – how one army would serve under the flag of another. It brought clarity to command issues that would be paramount in the

Second World War. It also made real the assumption that one day these armies would be serving together again. South Africa throughout was the least important partner. It conducted little corps-level training, instead seeing its needs locally as 'bush country' fighting. In 1939, it had just two experimental armoured cars and two old tanks, alongside 622 ox-drawn bush carts for logistics. The interwar years were lean ones, with work done on the cheap, the idea being that the Royal Navy could provide imperial defence. This was an expensive strategic blunder. Britain and its imperial forces were in a less favourable position in 1939 than 1914 – smaller, less modern armies – but battalions did move as one with (p. 229) 'commonality.' The staff apparatus was also there and unlike in 1914 no-one in 1939 (p. 269) 'slammed the shutters at Camberley and Quetta.' Instead, there were new courses at places such as Haifa. British supreme commander Alan Brooke moaned about dominion troops, but they were much easier to work with than allied ones. The Korean War Commonwealth Division in 1951 was the swansong of the imperial inter-operability mission.

Delaney is to be congratulated for an impressive study built on extensive archival material across four continents. The military education focus is narrow, but the intellectual reach is broad. It will undoubtedly appeal to a broad audience and will surely encourage more scholarship.

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