



*Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914-1918* by Craig Gibson.

New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xxi, 453. ISBN 978-0-521-83761-3.

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In *Behind the Front*, Craig Gibson, an independent scholar specializing in the study of the social and cultural dynamics of First World War British and Commonwealth armies, challenges the dominant narrative of the Western Front as an exclusively military landscape populated solely by soldiers and “constructed as an arena of military operations alone” (7-8). This portrayal, Gibson argues, misrepresents military service in France and Flanders in a least two significant ways. First, it overlooks the fact that most soldiers’ time in front-line trenches was only a part of their experience of the war. Regular rotations of troops in and out of line meant they also spent considerable time in the rear. Participation in major battles and offensives was relatively rare: “Indeed, the dictum that soldiering is mainly boredom punctuated by moments of terror was nowhere truer than on the western front” (21). Second, depictions of the war zones only as battlefields where soldiers “spent most if not all [of their] time manning the parapet” (14) elides the French and Flemish inhabitants who lived and worked near the front throughout the war.

The sociocultural, legal, and administrative aspects of the “neglected relationships that developed between British troops and local inhabitants” (6) are Gibson’s chief concern. His is an intricate, detailed “bottom-up history of contacts” (24) between soldiers and civilians across three phases of the war: the maneuver campaigns of summer and autumn 1914 (chapter 1), the static trench warfare between late 1914 and early 1918 (chapters 2-11), and the fluid, war-ending campaigns of the conflict’s final year (chapter 12).

Soldiers’ interactions with civilians involved billeting, requisitioning, exchanges of goods and services, land use, property damage, crime and discipline, and sexual relations. These are fascinating topics in their own right, but Gibson has a more ambitious goal—“to broaden the understanding of the military history of the Great War while at the same time rehabilitating the social history of the western front” (23).

Chapter 1, “The First Campaign,” explores the initial relations between the men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and French and Flemish locals in 1914, when “mobile operations militated against ... any intimacy other than that of the most fleeting kind” between troops and civilians (37). Still, locals in the war zone, many of whom recalled German depredations during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71), warmly welcomed the BEF, sometimes even enthusiastically. To show their appreciation of these allies who had come to help defend France against its existential enemy, they showered the troops with flowers, food, and alcohol, often in quantities that jeopardized march discipline (36).

Soon, however, ambivalence crept in. Some locals felt a “natural aversion to soldiers of all nationalities” (42), something characteristic of people with long historical memories of occupation and exploitation by foreign armies, “friendly” or not. BEF personnel on the Franco-Belgian border soon clashed with civilians over billeting, requisitioning, and property damage exacerbated by the heavy fighting. British officers, to relieve the tedium of the trenches, imported packs of beagles and conducted unauthorized hunts on private land, alienating “the peasants whose lands were damaged and who saw in the British practice a colonial mentality” (43). Moreover, farmers quickly realized that “so inter-

dependent were all facets of the rural economy that any upset, however caused[,] to the delicate balance among arable [land], pasture, and livestock, could prove disastrous” (45–46).

British soldiers reciprocated such mistrust and suspicion. The rank and file of the original BEF were recruited from the rural and urban poor, whose prewar foreign service had been garrisoning imperial outposts and fighting “lightly armed non-Europeans” (53). These men tended to look on all foreigners as “natives” and themselves as conquerors and occupiers, an attitude shared by their officers. A language barrier, too, separated British troops from French and Belgian civilians, as did BEF doubts about the political reliability of the locals. The Germans, Gibson reminds us, were in fact encouraging Flemish nationalists and maintained an espionage network in Belgium and northern France. The contrast between the generally friendly welcome given the British in summer 1914 and the civilians’ subsequent sullenness and resentment further convinced British soldiers and officers that the local population harbored pro-German elements, “if not spies” (57).

Chapters 2–11,<sup>1</sup> the book’s analytical core, concern the long trench-warfare phase of the conflict, which expanded and routinized the interactions between the BEF troops and their reluctant French and Flemish hosts. In keeping with the patterns set in 1914, friction was never far from the surface and fears of espionage never entirely vanished. British and Imperial troops particularly distrusted Belgium’s Flemish population, whose linguistic and cultural similarities to the Germans made them suspect (157–67).

For their part, French and Belgian civilians resented their British guests’ imperious attitudes and cavalier disregard for local agricultural practices. A deputy of the French National Assembly noted that his constituents thought “most of the damages” British troops inflicted on private property and farms “could be avoided” and complained of being treated “like a conquered country” (185). Nonetheless, encounters with civilians also sustained soldiers’ morale in myriad ways, from the physical rest and refreshment that off-duty soldiers enjoyed in the many rear-area *estaminets* (cafes and eateries) to simple interactions with French men, women, and children, who reminded troops of the family lives they had left behind when they donned a uniform and hoped to resume after the war. Of course, the war zone also furnished opportunities for sexual gratification in brothels, officially-sanctioned or not, and other types of intimate encounters with local women and prostitutes.

In practical terms, the burden of negotiating contacts with civilians fell squarely on the shoulders of the BEF’s junior officers, who were, Gibson observes, “integral” not only to practical functions like “billeting, requisitions, claims and land negotiations for games and training” (91), but to setting the tone of British army relations with locals. As de facto cultural intermediaries, they charted a precarious course. Platoon leaders and company commanders sometimes “put whatever comforts that could be obtained above all other considerations, including the property and feelings of the inhabitants” (379). To make their own and their men’s lives more bearable, many junior officers overlooked minor disciplinary infractions that soldiers committed against civilians.

On the other hand, “If the war from the allied perspective was about international treaties, law and order among nations and the treatment of noncombatants, the BEF’s own behavior was a sort of litmus test.... [I]f the allies were to win the ideological battle as much as the military struggle—the two were inextricably linked—relations between the BEF and local French and Belgian civilians had to be beyond reproach” (22).

Locals who dealt with the BEF might complain about its “colonial” attitudes and predilections. And British soldiers might have agreed with Robert Graves’s claim that “the peasants did not much

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1. Entitled, respectively, “Land,” “Administration,” “Billet,” “Communication,” “Friction,” “Farms,” “Damages,” “Money,” “Discipline,” “Sex.”

care whether they were on the German or the British side of the line” (380). Yet, Gibson argues,

such musings belie the very real differences between the inhabitants’ experience of British and Germans. Those in German-occupied territory endured much more than the requisitions and violence that typified German behavior in the war’s opening weeks but soon became policy. “Cut off, deprived of news, living in Germanized territory, targets of German propaganda,” Philippe Nivet writes of the occupied French, “they endure reduced rations, forced labor, innumerable restrictions, fines, deportations. A true regime of ‘terror’ is imposed.” Indeed, the French who lived under a second German occupation twenty years later judged that of the Great War “infinitely tougher” and were convinced that the Nazi regime “innovated nothing.” Unhappiness was their lot, concluded Annette Becker, as it was for the occupied of 1870–1. It is no wonder, concludes Nivet, that in May and June 1940, between six and eight million French fled the advancing Germans, making the decision to risk becoming a refugee in the interior—memories of the “Boches du Nord” of the Great War were still fresh—over the greater uncertainty of German occupation. (381)

Chapter 12, “The Last Campaign,” concerns the final months of the war, when the stalemate in the west gave way to the relatively mobile operations of 1918. The British Fifth Army’s unexpected, at times disorderly, retreat in the initial days of Germany’s “Michael” Offensive in March sorely strained the BEF’s relations with French civilians. Caught up in a fight for survival, soldiers engaged in pillaging, vandalism, and lapses of discipline that appalled civilians, French authorities, and the British high command alike (355–64).

More significantly, however, as the strategic tide of the war turned in the Allies’ favor, British troops at last attained what had so long eluded them—the liberation of French and Belgian civilians. As they advanced into formerly German-occupied territory, they experienced the genuine gratitude of civilians for their deliverance from a harsh occupation regime. For many, “the thrilling release of crushed French folk which we had always had at the back of our minds” (374) gave meaning to the war and made the hardships of the hellish preceding years worthwhile. “Whether they realized it or not, the inhabitants were concrete reminders of just what the British believed themselves to be fighting for, namely, the safety of their own homes and families, the protection of the non-invaded populations and the liberation of the occupied territories” (384).

By his focus on encounters with civilians as a crucial element of British soldiers’ motivation and morale in the Great War, Craig Gibson has shed new light on the willingness of millions of men to endure the war’s attritional grind. In so doing, he also persuasively refutes the common notion that only severe discipline and coercion kept soldiers in line (273–74). His masterly control of the relevant archival sources and secondary literature makes *Behind the Front* an excellent starting point for anyone wishing to gain a foothold in the historiography of the British experience of the Western Front.