

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jonathan Reed Winkler.** *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. 347 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02839-5.

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## The Development of American Strategic Communications

Hew Strachan wrote that three epithets are regularly used by historians when describing the Great War—global, total, and modern.[1] Jonathan Reed Winkler's innovative and enlightening examination of American strategic communications during the Great War demonstrates new dimensions to the war's worldwide geographic scope, the totality of both the means employed to wage it and the impact on its participants, and the modernity of its technological elements. An assistant professor of history at Wright State University, Winkler has produced a complex and wide-ranging book that not only integrates the field of American foreign relations history with military and naval history, but also with the histories of technology, economics, and business.[2]

Winkler asserts that the book is a "study of U.S. foreign relations during the First World War and the transformation of U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic relations with the world" (p. 2). His thesis is that the challenges posed to the United States by the Great War—challenges that were truly global, total, and modern—led "senior Wilson administration officials and military officers to accelerate efforts to link the country by submarine cable and long-distance radio with places of political and commercial importance to the United States" (p. 3). The goal of this new effort was nothing less than to "realign world communications" in ways that were more favorable to American national interests (p. 4). Winkler elegantly describes and thoroughly documents these efforts,

and concludes that they were only marginally successful, at best.

The story begins with a description of Britain's near domination of the international submarine cable communications network and Germany's impressive advances in long-distance radio capability in 1914. These advantages were the product of a lesser-known communications element of the famous arms (and naval) race in the decades prior to the war. The outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 quickly showed America's dependence on these foreign networks for its international communications capability—which was becoming increasingly necessary for the conduct of modern trade, finance, diplomacy, and warfare. Winkler describes the truly global efforts of the British and German governments (ranging from Africa to Mexico to the Far East) not only to maintain their own strategic communications, but to demolish those of the enemy. Caught in the crossfire of this first great modern instance of information warfare, American officials struggled first to defend U.S. communications "rights" as a neutral nation, and then expand U.S. communications capabilities as a would-be full-fledged belligerent power—associated but not allied with the *Entente* nations. Even though the United States joined the side that was, by 1917, dominating the information war, its troubles were far from over since, as Winkler writes, "no government message was safe over British cables" (p. 49). Farsighted officials, in and out of uni-

form, understood the need for America to have reliable and secure (meaning private) communications of sufficient capacity during both war and peace. Their efforts did set the United States on a path to be the global leader of radio communications by the end of the war, but they proved unable to substantially improve American cable communications capability. Winkler does an excellent job explaining why the United States succeeded in the former, and why it failed in the latter. Throughout, his writing is lucid, his discussions of scientific and technical matters are deftly handled, his use of archival and published sources is thorough, and his conclusions are sound.

In a world that more fully understands the military necessity of strategic communications and information operations, this book certainly falls within the field of military history. However, readers should be aware that Winkler spends more time discussing the inconveniences of conducting international business than he does on the specific problems of conducting a massive overseas military expedition in a world ablaze with information warfare and dealing with the challenges of an information blockade (p. 47). Few readers will doubt that the general communications challenges and threats Winkler describes negatively affected General Pershing's command of the American Expeditionary Forces, but they might expect a few more specific examples than the author provides. Similarly, his extensive discussion of the U.S. Navy's efforts to improve and control American wartime (and potentially peacetime) radio capabilities is an important part of naval history, even if specific examples of the importance of these communications to the crucial naval war in the Atlantic are lacking.

Winkler's book is more than just an interesting examination of an important era in American diplomatic, military, economic, and scientific history. It offers much food for thought to those aware of the dramatic communications improvements occurring around us today via cell phones, the Internet, more elaborate radios, and satellites. Ours is not the first era in which the pace of change in the field of communications technology is chal-

lenging the government's ability to write laws and regulations sufficient to ensure the safety and security of the country and its people in a time of war. In the first few months of the World War, American governmental officials learned just how important it was for the nation to have continuous, reliable communication with the rest of the world (p. 102); it was a lesson learned so well that President Wilson supposedly concluded that, along with access to petroleum and transportation, secure communications was one of the three things that determine international predominance (p. 256). As with his efforts to change the international political order at Versailles, Wilson failed to achieve his hopes for a new, pro-American, international communications order. Both would have to wait for a second great war to give the United States the will and the power to make those dreams more of a reality—even if short-lived.

*Nexus* is a well-written, nicely argued, and superbly researched history of an important but unappreciated era in America's halting rise to international predominance. Scholars in the fields of modern American history, U.S. foreign relations history, military and naval history, business history, and the history of science and technology can all find sufficient material here to warrant purchasing and reading this fine book. Those who do will probably join this reviewer in looking forward to a sequel to this story, in which the U.S. finally realizes the communications vision set out for it by Wilson during the First World War.

#### Notes

[1]. Hew Strachan, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

[2]. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force Academy, the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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